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ABSTRACT

This book was designed to help school board members work together to create an effective school board. Guidelines are based on the premise that organizational effectiveness depends on individuals having the ability to recognize others' frames of reference and to utilize multiple frames. The four frames commonly used by leaders include the structural, political, human resources, and symbolic frames. The book uses the fictional story of a committed female novice to illustrate the challenges that face the new school board members as she makes the transition from novice to veteran. In chapter 1, the newly elected board member realizes that the position may be much more personally and professionally challenging than she anticipated. Chapter 2 describes the confusion that ensues from ambiguous board-administration roles. The third chapter deals with the politics of education and policy formation, specifically, how to build coalitions among different interest groups. Ways to improve communication and built trust among board members are discussed in chapter 4. In the fifth chapter, the novice board member develops a deeper understanding of the symbolic role of school boards and the critical role that ceremony, ritual, and theater play in building confidence in district's schools. The final chapter describes how effective school leaders apply the values of the four frames of reference--excellence, justice, caring, and faith to their particular schools. Each chapter is followed by a "signpost," an interlude that summarizes the lessons learned in that chapter. (LMI)

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Becoming a School Board Member

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Becoming a School Board Member

Becoming a School Board Member

Lee G. Bolman
Terrence E. Deal
Sharon F. Rallis

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Acknowledgments

This is the third book in what we now call the "Rosehill Trilogy," a series of practical guides for educational leaders. *The Path to School Leadership: A Portable Mentor* told the story of Jaime Rodriguez during his first critical years as principal at Pico School. *Becoming a Teacher Leader: From Isolation to Collaboration*, set in the same year in the same school, chronicled Joan Hilliard's transition from a shaky novice teacher to a confident veteran and leader among her peers. Bolman and Deal wrote the first two books, but a book for school board members required an additional member on the writing team. We were very fortunate that Sharon Rallis agreed to join the effort. Sharon brought the perfect combination of real-world experience as a board member coupled with the expertise and insight of a scholar who has studied and written about school boards.

Many of the ideas in this book were stimulated by our research on school leadership under the auspices of the National Center for Educational Leadership, funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Our man in Washington, Ron Anson, has been a reliable source of ideas and support, often in the form of gentle nudging and constructive criticism. We are very grateful for his colleagueship and proud to count him as a friend.

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Introduction

School boards are under fire. Many are convinced that the concept of local control is outdated. Proponents of overhauling the district governance system often propose greater centralization, typically in the form of new state mandates and requirements. There are good reasons to be skeptical of such proposals. Most of the available evidence suggests that school governance suffers more from overcentralization and excessive bureaucracy than from autonomy run amok. Moreover, businesses, hospitals, and other enterprises are going in the opposite direction: They are rapidly decentralizing authority and decision-making in order to cope with an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable environment. We see more promise in helping improve rather than criticizing how local school boards do their job. The purpose of this book is to show board members how they can work together to create an effective school board.

As a school board member, you know firsthand the difficult problems that local communities expect schools to solve. Improving students' academic performance and enhancing their personal development are only a part of today's challenge. Schools are also asked to deal with issues of parental neglect, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and violence, among others. There was a time when such problems were rare or were handled by other agencies. But

families and churches are in crisis, and public and social service agencies are swamped by the rising tide of societal problems. As a result, issues that once fell outside the schools' jurisdiction now end up on the board's agenda. Life as a board member is, more than ever, fast paced, time-consuming, and complicated. Too often, it becomes frantic, volatile, and messy.

Your board responsibilities continually require you to organize sometimes vague and confusing signals into a diagnosis of what's really going on. Only then can you formulate realistic policy or determine a sensible course of action. To make it even more complicated, you are only one member of a group that must respond to the perceptions and concerns of a variety of constituents. Frequently, different interest groups are at odds with one another. Because boards can rarely base their decisions on unequivocal scientific evidence, members fall back on prior experience, personal values, and intuition. Pressures from constituents also help in sorting things out. Although board members often complain about not getting enough information to make decisions, it is rarely easy to find meaningful patterns in what is available.

Like every individual, you see the world through your own unique lenses, or frames. Your cognitive frames help you make sense of situations that you encounter. A board member with experience as an accountant often sees things very differently from someone who works at home, runs a hardware store, or practices law. All of us develop our own personal worldviews through many years of education and experience. Even when your sense-making lenses are inaccurate or incomplete, you have to rely on them. They give order to confusion and let you act rather than become paralyzed. Without a frame of reference, surprising and stressful situations become overwhelming. Although your diagnosis may be wrong, you'll probably stick with it and defend it. Many fractious board meetings result from a war of frames rather than conflicts of personalities.

In working with leaders around the world, we have found that people who become more aware of their own personal perspectives become more effective. It helps to have a manageable set of frames, each offering a window on different facets of the challenges of school governance. It is also easier to know where your colleagues are coming from if you understand their frames of reference.

The ability to use multiple frames has three advantages: Each frame can be coherent, focused, and powerful; the full array is more comprehensive than any single frame; and multiple frames let you reframe. Reframing is a conscious effort to size up a situation from multiple angles. In times of crisis and overload (a regular feature of life on a school board), you tend to feel confused, overwhelmed, or stuck if you can't reframe. Sometimes, when trapped in the wrong frame, you are immobilized. Other times, you plunge mindlessly forward into reckless or misguided action. When we don't know what to do, we often do more of what we know—even if it makes things worse. Like their individual members, boards often make both errors. They become immobilized by disputes about whose version of reality is correct, or they lapse into groupthink and develop new policies or rules that create more problems than solutions. To avoid these common traps, boards often need to shift their frames of reference. We have identified four frames that are commonly used by leaders in every sector, including education.

The *structural frame* emphasizes productivity and assumes that classrooms, schools, and districts work best when goals and roles are clear, and when the efforts of individuals and groups are organized through authority, policies, rules, formal meetings, and informal, face-to-face communication. Problems arise from confusion or misalignments in the formal system. They can be resolved by clarifying roles, shifting authority, restructuring, or creating new systems and policies.

The *political frame* points out the limits of authority and the inevitability that resources are almost always too scarce to fulfill all demands. Districts and individual schools within them are arenas where individuals and groups jockey for power. Board members, administrators, teacher unions, and community members get caught up in this swirling vortex of political activity. Goals emerge from bargaining and compromise among different interests rather than from rational analysis or command at the top. Conflict becomes an inescapable, even welcomed, by-product of everyday life. Handled properly, it is a source of constant energy and renewal.

The *human resource frame* is a favorite among teachers and school administrators. It highlights the importance of personal needs and motives and holds that classrooms, like other social systems, work best when individual needs are satisfied in a caring, trusting work

environment. Showing concern for others and providing ample opportunities for participation and shared decision-making are among the ways to enlist people's commitment and involvement. Many districts across the United States are currently experimenting with ways to give administrators and teachers more influence and ownership in their day-to-day work.

Finally, the *symbolic frame* centers attention on symbols, meaning, belief, and faith. Schools, like other human groups, create symbols to cultivate commitment, hope, and loyalty. Symbols govern behavior through informal, implicit, and shared rules, agreements, and understandings. Stories, metaphors, heroes and heroines, ritual, ceremony, and play add zest and existential buoyancy. The school becomes a way of life rather than merely a place of work.

Administrators and teachers often rely primarily on the human resource or structural lenses. Some board members do the same, whereas others see things mostly in political terms. Many disputes among board members are rooted in competing assumptions about whether schools should be caring families, productive factories, or lively forums for political debate. Relatively few boards fully appreciate the power of symbols in providing meaning and hope. Board meetings are often hotly contested political arenas with special interests vying for their share of scarce resources. But they are also rituals that convey important values and symbols to a community. If you sometimes feel that each board meeting brings a series of surprises, ambushes, and pitfalls, reframing can help.

In our teaching and consulting, we have presented the idea of reframing to thousands of professionals around the world. As they learn to understand and apply the frames, they regularly tell us three things:

1. The frames stay with them because they are easy to remember.
2. The frames help them see things they did not notice before and help them understand what is really going on.
3. When they are able to reframe, people see new possibilities and become more versatile and effective in their responses.

We think these same lessons apply to the work of school board members. This book is designed as a portable mentor. Through close and intense dialogues between a new board member and a

seasoned veteran, the novice comes to see troublesome situations more clearly, anticipate trouble before it arises, and develop more comprehensive and powerful strategies for leadership. We believe that the challenges facing other board members are parallel to those encountered by our book's protagonist, Sheila Daly. We have deliberately made her a highly committed and talented young board member who persists in the face of obstacles and learns from her mistakes. She is also blessed with a very wise mentor and some helpful colleagues (as well as a few who are not so helpful). We have all seen plenty of accounts of what's wrong with schools. We want to provide a more optimistic view—a hopeful image of the possibilities for board leadership.

The book tells Sheila Daly's story as she struggles through the transition from novice to veteran. Sheila is fortunate to have guidance from Fran Wilcox, a close friend and experienced former board member. From the night of her election, Sheila finds herself encountering a series of surprises and puzzles. When she finds herself in situations that make no sense, or has dug herself into a hole and has no idea how to get out, she turns to Fran for counsel.

Chapter 1, "Election Night: The Party's Over," takes Sheila from the joy of victory to the sobering realization that the job may be much more challenging, both personally and professionally, than she thought. In Chapter 2, "What Are We Supposed to Be Doing? Finding a Role," Sheila unintentionally makes a number of miscues because of confusion about what she is and isn't supposed to do as a board member. Fran helps her understand what happened and what she can do about it. Chapter 3, "Sorting Out the Politics," finds Sheila and her board colleagues coping with major political struggles over a new school and over the district's policies on inclusion of special needs students. Sheila is initially depressed about the possibility of ever making sensible decisions with so many different groups fighting so passionately for inconsistent outcomes. Fran helps her develop a more optimistic view of the possibilities for constructive politics.

Chapter 4, "Getting Together," opens with Sheila's regret about her feelings of loneliness and distance in relation to her board colleagues. Fran helps Sheila find ways to improve communication and build trust in her relationships with her fellow board members. In Chapter 5, "Ritual and Celebration," Sheila helps to plan a

highly successful ceremony and celebration in connection with the dedication of a new elementary school. In the process, she develops a deeper understanding of the symbolic role of school boards and of the critical role that ceremony, ritual, and theater play in building confidence and spirit in a district's schools.

The story concludes in Chapter 6, "Passing the Torch." Sheila, now in her second term, has been elected as the new board chair. She and Fran talk about her new job and what it takes to be a successful school board chair.

Each chapter in the story is followed by a "signpost," an interlude that summarizes and integrates Sheila's learning in the preceding chapter. Collectively, the signposts represent a short course in boardmanship: a series of insights and rules of thumb for enhancing your effectiveness.

The dialogues between Sheila Daly and Fran Wilcox are much like those that we have with educational leaders all the time. Our role is usually to offer questions rather than answers. Good questions help people see things in new ways and recognize promising leadership opportunities that were there all along. When school board members are able to reframe situations, they become more confident, more certain, and less anxious and overwhelmed. Even more important, they get more done.

We hope that you find the story both lively and informative. We grounded the book in the real world of school boards and school districts. It offers a return to an old-fashioned approach for learning a craft. Sheila Daly and Fran Wilcox don't have all the answers to the mysteries of educational leadership, but they are concerned about many of the same questions and issues that you face. You will find yourself almost automatically applying new perspectives and insights to the challenges you face. We hope you will be stimulated to think more deeply about yourself and your approach to leadership. Above all, we hope the book will help you find new paths to confidence and success and deepen your contribution to the students, teachers, parents, and community members who count on you for leadership.

Election Night: The Party's Over

It was almost as painful as childbirth, with even more ups and downs—the most incredible emotional roller coaster Sheila Daly had ever been on. Agonizing over the decision to run. Scrambling for contributions. Giving the same speech over and over. Slogging door to door. Hours on the phone. Dismay and tears as she began to feel it was all a waste—she would lose anyway. Biting her nails on election night. Depression when the first returns showed her behind. Nervous excitement as she began to pull even. And then the overwhelming rush of joy and relief when she realized she had won. She really had been elected to the Rosehill school board.

She'd wanted to win for a lot of reasons. She had more time now that she wasn't working, and she really wanted something else to do. As much as she loved being a mother, she missed her old job. She needed a personal boost, and what could be better than feeling that people in her hometown liked her and trusted her enough to vote for her? There was family tradition, too. Her parents had brought her up to believe she had a duty to serve her community, and her dad had once been a member of the school board. Even more important, her two children, Chris and Amy, were both in school now.

They were getting a good education, but not as good as it could be. Nothing was more important to Sheila than her children.

She was almost in a trance as well-wishers showered her with congratulations. She knew she'd won, but it was still hard to accept. Was she ready? Did she know enough about education? She was a good engineer. She was a good parent. She'd gone through Rosehill's schools. Did all that qualify her to make educational policy?

"Let's get out of here," she heard someone say.

Disoriented for a moment, she smiled when she realized that the words came from Fran Wilcox. Fran, her strongest supporter. Fran, who encouraged her to run in the first place. "Fran, thank heavens you're here. I don't know if I'm tickled pink or scared to death."

"For me," Fran responded, "it was mostly being scared my first election. But now that you'll be filling my old seat, I've never been more pleased in my life."

"They're awfully big shoes to fill."

"Worry about that tomorrow. Right now, RCC's having a victory party over at the Portuguese American Center. How about we go together?"

RCC was the Rosehill Civic Coalition. They'd done a lot to get Sheila elected. It felt like an invitation she couldn't refuse.

"You'll be the star of the show," said Fran as they headed out to her car.

The Portuguese American Club was housed in an old frame building just outside downtown Rosehill. As she entered, she noted the vinyl furniture, pine paneling, cloud of tobacco smoke, and din of dozens of conversations. Sheila suddenly felt a panicky urge to turn around and go home. Too late now. She was surrounded by neighbors and supporters. They pumped her hand. Brought her drinks. Patted her on the back. Told her how proud they were. Reminded her how hard they worked for her.

Billy Dean, an RCC activist, spoke the first words that started a knot in her stomach. The knot only grew tighter for the rest of the night.

"Sheila, congratulations!" Billy said. "Now that *we* got you elected, just don't forget us!"

It was vintage Billy. Loud voice, huge smile, and overpowering handshake. She'd known him all her life. When he said, "You've

got to look out for number one," she'd never doubted his sincerity. Billy owned Rosehill's biggest gas station, and she suspected that his support had a lot more to do with business than education. Still, she was caught off guard. She tried not to show her annoyance. Nobody got me elected, she thought to herself. I got *myself* elected. Ignore what he said. Still, his words echoed as she moved across the room.

She was relieved to see Martin Jaimeson approaching. He'd been her father's old golfing partner. She still remembered the doll he'd given her on her third birthday. She also couldn't forget the check he'd sent to her campaign—her single biggest contribution.

"Your dad will be so proud when he hears, Sheila. Heck, *I'm* awfully proud of you myself," he said before giving her an enthusiastic hug.

"Thanks, Martin. Your support made a big difference."

"I just wanted to see the best person win. Hey, I talked to your dad on the phone the other night. Told him how jealous I was. He's down there in Florida playing golf every day. I'm still slaving away at the salt mine."

The "salt mine" was Rosehill's largest bank. Jaimeson was its president.

"So when are you going to get out?" Sheila asked with a smile.

"Sally and I hope to join your parents down in Florida soon. Can't go yet, though. Rosehill is changing pretty fast these days. I want to see how the wind is blowing, if you know what I mean."

Sheila could only guess what he had in mind, but nodded anyway.

"Of course," he added, "I know you won't hesitate to call me any time you need a little advice about the schools. You wouldn't want to make the wrong decisions, would you?"

The knot in Sheila's stomach tightened more. Maybe he was just being fatherly, but it almost sounded like a threat. "Thanks, Martin," she said, trying to be as noncommittal as possible. "I'm sure I'll need all the help I can get."

Just then, Sybil Canto grabbed her hand. Sybil and Sheila both had children in the same kindergarten class, but they knew each other only from a few brief encounters at the school. "I am *soooo* glad someone with *young* children was elected! I *know* you'll support the decision to have buses stop at *every* corner. You're a

mother, and you know how dangerous it is for kids to cross *any* streets today. I know *you'll* agree that money is not an object when kids' safety is at stake! That's why I voted for you."

Before Sheila could even respond, another woman chimed in. "And *I* voted for you because you're the kind of person who will stand up against people who want to put a nativity scene in front of the high school in December. You're educated. You have to know that religious displays in the schools are unconstitutional."

"That's crazy," said a third woman. "There's *always* been a nativity scene at Christmas. You remember that, Sheila. You're *from* Rosehill. Unlike *some* people. I wouldn't have supported you if I thought you didn't even care about our children growing up with Christian values."

By now, Sheila's head was spinning. The knot in her stomach was the size of a large fist. She broke away from the escalating debate only to be grabbed by Ben Bradshaw. In addition to owning Bradshaw's True Value Hardware, Ben had chaired the school board for years.

"After you already, huh?" he said. "Happens every election. Extremists on both sides of every issue. Trying to get your ear. And your vote. Just stay calm and find the middle ground. That's always worked for me. You're young, Sheila, but in a way you're like an old-timer. Everyone remembers your dad."

The knot tightened into a coiled spring. She wondered how many people had been voting for her father as much as for her. "Dad wasn't a middle-of-the-roader," Sheila said with exasperation. "He stood for something."

"Of course, dear," said Ben in a tone that Sheila heard as condescending. "But things have changed since his day. Don't worry, though. I'll help show you the ropes."

Sheila moved away. She wanted to find the nearest exit. Gene Lorenzo cut her off before she got there. "Congratulations, Sheila!" he called out. "We'll be fellow classmates on the board. I'm really looking forward to working with you."

"Same to you, Gene, but I'm beginning to wonder what we got ourselves into. Is everyone in the room lobbying you for something?"

"Everyone knows why I was elected. To make sure that special needs children get the services they deserve. Folks know I won't pinch pennies when we have students who aren't even getting the programs that the law requires. It's going to be a battle. Hope I can count on your support. You can be either for me or against me on this. Don't forget, I have a lot of support in the community."

Once again, Sheila found herself trying to smile pleasantly even as the knot tightened several more notches. "Gene, I know I have a lot to learn about special education, and I'm sure you can help."

She tried another run for the exit but ran into Mary Martinez, the third of her new board "classmates." The first member of Rosehill's Hispanic community ever elected to public office, Martinez had campaigned hard for better education for minority students. On most other issues, she seemed to be a moderate.

"Great night for Rosehill!" said Mary as she embraced Sheila enthusiastically. "I'm *really* looking forward to working with you. Together, we can do a lot for children."

Sheila wished she could match Mary's enthusiasm. "I hope so," she responded. "Right now it feels pretty overwhelming. You have a degree in education, don't you?"

"Right. A bachelor's degree in science teaching, and a master's in bilingual education. I'm the first college graduate in my family. My folks never got much schooling. So they were pretty proud."

"They must be even prouder now," Sheila responded warmly.

"Sorry to interrupt," said Fran, "but Sheila's limo is about to leave. The board doesn't own me any more, so I can leave when I want. A word of advice. You should both get some sleep while you still can. You'll need it."

Once settled in Fran's car, Sheila found herself feeling exhausted and close to tears.

"I saw you keep trying to get out of there," Fran said gently. "I know just how you felt. But you were terrific responding to everyone's agenda."

"I wish I could believe that. I felt it kept going from bad to worse."

"That's how I felt the night I was first elected. Miserable. I wondered what I'd done."

"That's hard to believe. You're my idol. I'll never be able to handle all the politics the way that you do."

"When I first got into it, I had no idea how many problems people wanted me to solve. Some important, others trivial. Get rid of the basketball coach at the high school. Fix the furnace at the middle school. More AP courses for seniors. Do something about the food in the school cafeterias. Add staff and programs, but cut costs. It seemed like it was endless."

Sheila was able to laugh for the first time that evening. The knot began to relax. "I really hated it. Everyone there acting as if they owned a piece of me," she said.

"I had the same feeling at first. On some issues, I had pretty clear opinions. On a lot of them, I really didn't know where I stood. I was surprised at how many things about schools I'd never really thought about."

"Me too. Does it ever get any better?"

"You'll learn as you go along. And never forget why you ran. You wanted to help kids and make Rosehill a better place to live."

"But how do you help the community when everyone wants something different?"

"That's what the job is about. Helping the community make decisions even when people are divided. It's never easy, but you'll get better at it."

"I hope you're right."

Fran must have noticed the glum expression on Sheila's face as they pulled up in front of her house. "Look, Sheila, I've known you a long time. You have strong values. You listen. Your engineering background certainly won't hurt. And you have my phone number."

Sheila felt only a glimmer of optimism as she stepped out of Fran's car, but she responded as cheerfully as she could. "Thanks, Fran. I hope it's OK if I call you a lot!" She smiled and said goodnight.

As she entered the house, she looked for signs that Ted might still be up. She'd told him not to wait up but was hoping he would anyway. She called softly and got no response. She looked in on Chris and Amy. They were both asleep. She replaced the covers that Chris always kicked off and retrieved Amy's teddy bear from the floor.

Seeing that the master bedroom was dark, she tried to tip-toe in as quietly as possible. Her heart jumped when the light by the bed

suddenly flashed on. It was Ted, perched against the pillows, smiling broadly. Above him, a large poster with the words, "Congratulations! You're the Greatest!" Balloons floated around the bedroom. Next to Ted, in the center of the bed, was a silver tray with a red rose, two glasses, and a bottle of champagne.

"You almost scared me to death," Sheila protested.

He offered her a glass of champagne. "This is gonna be the best surprise party we've ever had," he said with a grin.

By the time Sheila finally drifted off to sleep, the knot in her stomach had long since unraveled.

SIGNPOST 1
Learning the Ropes

What happened to Sheila after her election is not unusual. The adrenaline rush of the campaign and the elation of victory often give way quickly to the inevitable, stubborn realities of governing schools. Hopes of shaping education for the better often founder on a complicated mix of vexing obstacles: scarce resources, special interest groups, hidden agendas, vague goals, spotty information, and dispersed power.

Governing is a mixed-motive game, but many new board members have little experience with the political process. They don't understand the rules of the game very well. They have been thrown into a very complex situation with minimal training or coaching. They are not sure whom they can rely on. They worry about getting too close to the superintendent. Sunshine laws and mistrust of other board members make it hard to get much help from colleagues.

As a result, board members often launch their policy-making careers isolated, afraid, unsure of what their job really is, and besieged by special interests who want to woo them, win them over, or intimidate them. They must often sink or swim on their own. They frequently misread the signals, make decisions without really understanding their options, and make embarrassing blunders. They rarely get straight feedback to know why things went wrong or what they might have done differently.

Sheila is fortunate to have a friend and colleague in Fran, a supportive mentor who can help her figure out what's going on, identify options, and find the courage to move ahead. Fran helps Sheila understand that her confusion and uncertainty are normal rather than signs of personal deficiencies. To be successful, new school board members need to sift through the stream of "messes" on the agenda to find opportunities to shape the schools in positive directions. Unlike too many new board members, Sheila has found a source of sage advice on when to roll with the punches and how to fight successfully.

If more board members could find a Fran to guide them at the beginning, many of the widely cited problems of board governance would be less debilitating. All human organizations breed difficult challenges. It's when you don't know what's going on or what to do about it that it all starts to unravel and a knot forms in the pit of your stomach. We hope that Fran's conversations with Sheila will provide readers with a vicarious learning experience: a kind of portable mentor. We also hope they will stimulate you to seek out your own guide to help you learn the ropes.

What Are We Supposed to Be Doing? Finding a Role

Why does it always ring just when I'm rushing to get the kids off to school?" Sheila looked with annoyance at the offending kitchen phone. She grabbed for the receiver with one hand, trying to spread peanut butter with the other.

"Hello," she said impatiently.

"Sheila, this is Mildred Hofsteder. Superintendent of schools."

"Oh, uh, well. . . ."

"Am I getting you at a bad time?"

"No, it's OK. Just trying to get my children ready for school."

"I understand," said Mildred soothingly. "I know how it is. I'll be brief. I just wanted to be one of the first to congratulate you on last night's victory."

"Thanks. It was close, but we made it."

"I'd love to get together with you sometime in the next few days. Just to get to know each other a little more. Maybe talk a little about how we can work together."

"Sure, Mildred, that's a good idea." Sheila knew she shouldn't be surprised. Fran had told her to expect Mildred's call. But she was still caught off guard.

"How about tomorrow afternoon? Maybe around 1:30 or 2?"

Sheila groped frantically for the kitchen calendar. Buried somewhere again, she thought with annoyance. Was the culprit Ted or one of the kids? She tried to remember her schedule for the next day. She drew a blank.

"I guess that'll work," Sheila replied, hoping she wasn't digging herself into a hole. She didn't want to seem disorganized at the start of a new relationship.

One day and several schedule-juggling phone calls later, Sheila arrived a few minutes early at the superintendent's office. As she approached the secretary's desk, she started to introduce herself, but the secretary interrupted to say, "Oh, yes, Mrs. Daly. Dr. Hofsteder said to send you right in. By the way, congratulations. I was pulling for you."

Sheila was impressed as she entered. The large desk was remarkably organized: no disorderly mounds, no stray bits and pieces of paper. The bookcases were full but neatly tended. Rosehill's previous superintendents, all men, stared down from the walls. Most wore stern expressions, as if they harbored grave doubts about the current incumbent. Mildred was on her feet right away, welcoming Sheila and showing her to a comfortable chair near the window.

The superintendent took charge immediately. "Glad you could come on such short notice, Sheila. We'll be seeing a lot of each other now that you're on the board. I'm sure we can work together on behalf of Rosehill's young people."

"Of course," Sheila replied. "That's why I ran for the board."

"I followed your campaign with a lot of interest. Now that you've won, what are your most important hopes for what you'd like to do?"

Sheila was surprised. Why did the question catch her off guard? She hesitated. What had she been saying for the past several months about why she wanted to be on the school board? She tried to choose her words carefully. "Well, you know my platform—quality education through better management."

"You're trained as an engineer, aren't you?"

"Yes, I worked with an electronics firm until my second child was born."

"That's what I thought. Your background could be a big help to us. Our classrooms need to keep up with all the changes in technology. We've fallen a little behind."

"I'd certainly like to help."

"You have two children in our schools, is that right?"

"Chris and Amy. They're both at Pico School."

"That's another plus. It gives you an inside feel for what we're trying to do. But it can work the other way, too. Sometimes other people get a little confused about which hat you're wearing. It's important to be clear about when you're acting as a school board member and when you're acting as a parent."

"What do you mean?" Sheila asked. She felt a trace of annoyance. Was the superintendent giving her a lecture?

"Suppose that you call me about a problem in your children's school. Would you be calling as a parent or a board member?"

"Couldn't it be both?"

"If it's not confusing to people, yes. Remember, as a board member, you're only one member of an official group. Parents are free to act as individuals on behalf of their own personal concerns. The board has to act as a unit on behalf of all the students of Rosehill. Queries or commands from individual board members can lead to trouble or confusion."

"Are you telling me I'll have more constraints as a board member?"

"Not exactly," said Mildred carefully. "Maybe just more responsibility. You have to weigh your duties as a board member against your concerns as a parent. But don't worry. If you have any questions, call me, or call Ben Bradshaw. We'll both be glad to talk to you."

As she left the superintendent's office, Sheila was puzzled. Is the superintendent just trying to be helpful? she wondered. Or is she telling me how to do my job? Does she work for us, or do we work for her? She hoped it would all sort out over time.

A week later, Sheila found herself in the high school gym feeling extremely self-conscious. She tried to look appropriately dignified while sitting in a swivel chair at least one size too large for her. The table in front of her helped. So did the nameplate identifying her

as "Mrs. Daly." She was glad to have Mary Martinez sitting next to her. The table they shared formed the left side of a shallow U. In the center at the base of the U sat Ben Bradshaw, the board chair. He was flanked by Beverly Billings and Clyde Poole, both veterans of the board.

"That must be the heavyweight table," she whispered to Mary.

Mary laughed. "Then what's the superintendent doing way over at the far end next to the other two rookies? Isn't she supposed to run the meeting? Or is the chair supposed to do that?"

"I wish we'd gotten a better briefing. Do you have any idea what we're supposed to do?"

"Not really," said Mary. "And if you look at the other two rookies, judging from the looks on their faces, I don't think they do, either."

Sheila looked across at Gene Lorenzo and Shirley Poole. "I hope we don't look as nervous as they do," she whispered back to Mary.

"Not a very big crowd," Mary responded.

"More empty chairs than people. I'm not sure whether to feel relieved or disappointed. But Jim Rickman's here." Rickman, the reporter for Rosehill's newspaper, sat by himself in a corner near the back of the room.

"Not Jim," Mary corrected. "James. He insists. He wants to be ready when the *New York Times* calls looking for a new star reporter."

"Who are the people sitting over there near the front?"

"I think they're from the Science Scope and Sequence Committee. You got the memo from the superintendent?"

"I got it but I'm not sure I understand it. Maybe you need a graduate degree in education to understand this stuff."

"I *do* have a degree. I'm still not sure I understood it all."

Just then, Ben Bradshaw called the meeting to order. As he started through the items on the night's agenda, Sheila kept looking toward her more experienced colleagues for clues on what to do.

"Following board policy," said Ben, "we'll begin with a 15-minute public forum. The board always welcomes citizen input. If anyone has something to say, just stand up, introduce yourself, and tell us what's on your mind."

A young woman headed immediately for the microphone. "I'm a working mother," she began. Her voice was loud. She sounded

nervous, but passionate about her concerns. "I represent all the working mothers of Rosehill. We aren't being served by our schools. Neighboring districts already have after-school programs. Rosehill is still living in the 1950s, doing nothing for working parents! Children are suffering! We're at our wits' end. We need extended day now!"

Sheila was surprised that no one on the board responded after the young woman finished. Ben simply thanked her for her views and moved on to the next speaker. Then he moved to announcements and information items on the agenda. Sheila felt uneasy and puzzled. Her discomfort grew as the meeting went on. When the meeting adjourned, she hoped that informal, after-meeting conversations might help her make sense of things. But Mary had to get home to relieve her baby-sitter and everyone else on the board seemed to have something else to do.

Sheila dialed Fran's number as soon as she got home. "I can't believe I have to call you right after my first meeting. But I'm confused. No, worse than that. I'm disappointed. I'm not a rookie when it comes to meetings. I went to plenty at my old firm. Thought it would help me understand what a school board is supposed to do. No way."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, really! We got some reports but didn't do anything about them. We didn't decide anything. We got citizen input but didn't really pay any attention to it. About the only thing we did was approve reports from two committees. Why do I feel that we didn't really accomplish anything?"

"What did you expect?" Fran asked.

Sheila hesitated. "I don't know. Make some decisions. Develop policy."

"What would that look like?"

"Um . . . well, I'm not sure. Maybe the superintendent would present us with issues and we'd determine how to handle them," said Sheila.

"On the spot?"

"Sort of. Doesn't the superintendent give us the pros and cons and let us judge? Like that meeting I went to last year where they talked about the bus contract. Mildred gave the facts and the board made a decision," said Sheila.

"What you saw was the last act in a long drama. You didn't see the hours we spent behind the scenes interviewing bus companies and reviewing contracts with the lawyer. Anyway, the bus decision was an easy one."

"Why?"

"Not much debate about the primary criteria—service, safety, and costs. The data were pretty clear—good numbers from the business manager. Too bad there weren't more decisions like that. On most of the important issues, the data are fuzzy, the criteria are vague, and you've got different groups with different interests battling each other."

"How do you ever make any decisions?"

"It's not easy. Part of the problem is figuring out which things the board even needs to make decisions about. What's important and what's a waste of time? It used to drive me nuts. We'd spend hours on trivia, then rush through something really important."

"Why?"

"Board members don't always agree on what's important. A lot of it is how you structure the meeting."

"Meaning what?"

"There are three or four things that really make a difference. You need a process for setting the agenda that everyone understands and supports. You need a chair who keeps the meeting on track. The administration has to keep you informed so the board doesn't get blindsided. Most of all, you need to remember that the board's job is to make policy, not micromanage."

"So how do you know which is which? You're not much help!" groaned Sheila.

"You learn what questions to ask. How does it relate to the district's long-term direction? How many people does it affect? Is it a big investment of the district's resources? Is this really going to make a difference in how the schools serve the community? Or is it just some little short-term thing that doesn't really matter?"

"What if it's somewhere in between?"

"You have to make a judgment call. That's what you were elected to do."

"I ran because I wanted to make a difference."

"Fine. So what kind of difference do you want to make?"

"I thought I knew. Now I'm not so sure. Maybe I need to get out and spend some time in the schools. Mildred said I'd be welcome."

"You could learn a lot. I know I did. Just remember: policy, not micromanagement."

Over the next weeks, Sheila enjoyed her visits to Rosehill's schools. Principals greeted her warmly. Two gave her personal tours of their buildings. The high school principal offered copies of the curriculum guides on his shelves. Sheila saved her last visit for Pico School. After all, this was her children's school. She already knew the principal, Jaime Rodriguez. They had exchanged casual greetings on a number of prior occasions. Rodriguez had always seemed friendly and earnest—maybe even too eager—and wanted to make the school a success. It was his first year at Pico. Sheila knew from the parent grapevine that some veteran teachers were skeptical about his leadership.

When she arrived for this "official" visit, she was disappointed. Rodriguez seemed harried. After chatting with her briefly in his office, he excused himself for another appointment and sent her off to wander around on her own. No guided tour. No curriculum guides.

A few days later, she and Fran were having lunch in Andy's Cafe, one of Rosehill's most popular informal lunch spots.

"So what did you learn from your district tour?"

"Well, the buildings are mostly in good shape. We have up-to-date curriculum guides. The schools are orderly, most of the time. Principals seem to know their jobs . . . that's pretty much it."

"You were expecting more?"

Sheila started to wonder what she had expected. "I'm not sure. My biggest disappointment was Rodriguez at Pico. I mean, that's my kids' school. There's a fourth-grade teacher there, and everyone knows she can't handle the kids. I wanted to hear what he plans do to about her."

"Did you ask him?"

"No. You warned me about micromanaging. But I did ask him how he feels about including special needs kids in regular classrooms."

"That's a big issue for you?"

"There's a kid in Chris's class. Roscoe. Very aggressive, hyperactive. There's an aide with him, but he's still a problem."

"What did Jaime say about inclusion?"

"He never really gave me a straight answer. Just asked me a lot of questions. What do I think about it? Do I understand its purpose? All I learned was that I don't really know much."

"It won't be the last time you'll feel that way. It goes with the territory of being a lay board member."

"But how am I supposed to learn about issues like inclusion? Shouldn't the professionals tell us what they recommend?"

"This is another question about your role. Were you elected to make the best possible decisions about children's learning?"

"I hope so."

"Then you have to study the issues. Decide for yourself what you think. The inclusion policy is part of the board's job. Supervising fourth-grade teachers isn't. Leave that to the administrators. That's what they were hired to do."

"But what if they're not doing it?"

"Then it becomes a problem for the superintendent. If the superintendent can't solve it through her principals, it becomes a problem for the board."

"I don't remember ever hearing you speak so strongly about anything," a surprised Sheila commented.

"Mea culpa. I do get passionate about board work. It comes from spending eight years at it."

As Sheila drove home, she still felt puzzled. It had seemed so clear at first. The board makes policy. The superintendent makes it happen. But what should she do about problems she observed on her visits? Particularly where her own son was involved? Her quandary deepened as soon as she arrived home. Chris came home from school clearly troubled. It was Roscoe again. This time, Chris told her, Roscoe had pushed two children down a stairway.

"Mom," Chris said, "I'm scared of him."

Sheila tried to reassure her son but didn't feel very convincing. This wasn't the first incident with Roscoe. Only a few days earlier, another Pico parent had stopped Sheila in the supermarket to complain about Roscoe and the lack of discipline in the school.

After Chris left to play, Sheila pondered what to do. Should she call the superintendent? Would she be seen as meddling? But she couldn't just sit there and do nothing, could she? Reluctantly, she picked up the phone. She almost hoped that the call wouldn't get through. It did. Mildred took the call immediately.

"Mildred, this is Sheila. You said to call if anything came up. I'm sorry my first call has to be with a problem. My son, Chris—he's in Ms. Hilliard's class at Pico—has told me several times about a boy named Roscoe in his class who's a real troublemaker. He's hurting other kids and it doesn't seem that the teacher is able to handle him. My son is afraid. Other parents have told me they're concerned. Roscoe never seems to get punished—just sent off with someone. An aide, I guess. Can you do something about this?"

Mildred paused. "I'll look into it. This child may be on an individual education plan. I'll get back to you when I know more. Thanks for letting me know about your concern."

The next morning, Mildred called back. "Sheila? This is Mildred Hofsteder. I talked to Mr. Rodriguez about the issue you raised yesterday."

"That's service. Thanks for looking into it so quickly."

"He talked to Ms. Hilliard and to the aide, Mr. Kay. That child is a special needs student. He's in a regular classroom under the district's inclusion policy. Mr. Kay is assigned full time to make sure the arrangement works out."

"Then why all these incidents?"

"According to Ms. Hilliard and Mr. Kay, there have actually been only two incidents involving physical contact. Neither one produced any serious injury."

"That's not what I've heard."

"Mr. Rodriguez told me that if there have been any others, he would like to know about them. You know how rumors sometimes get magnified. Anyway, Ms. Hilliard and Mr. Kay say that transition problems to a new school situation are normal, but they see progress. They do not expect any further incidents."

"Can they guarantee it?"

Mildred paused. "Can you guarantee that your child won't get in a fight sometime this year?"

Sheila felt embarrassed. "Probably not. I just hope the teachers are right. Anyway, thanks for getting back to me so promptly."

As soon as Sheila put down the phone, it rang again.

"Sheila, this is Fran. I have to go out of town this evening, but I want to let you know about something I've been hearing."

"What's that?"

"You called Mildred yesterday about an incident in Chris's school."

Sheila was stunned. "How did you know?"

"Jaime Rodriguez told me."

"He told you? Why? What did he say?"

"He said the superintendent came down on him pretty hard after your call."

"Oh, no!" Sheila groaned.

"It gets worse."

Sheila felt a mixture of surprise and panic. She wanted to speak, but no words came.

"Jaime talked to the teacher and the aide. With kids on IEPs, teachers are pretty sensitive to interference from above. The way they see it, it's a no-win. First the district creates a policy that makes their jobs a lot harder. Then it leaves them hanging in the wind when anything goes wrong."

"So everyone at Pico is upset with me?"

"Not everyone, maybe. But the teacher involved talked to the union rep. The rep complained to Jaime yesterday afternoon. The good news is that the teacher didn't file a grievance."

"Fran, this is awful. I was just trying to help. Have I made a mess of things?"

"Nothing that can't be cleaned up," said Fran reassuringly. "In fact, this isn't nearly as deep as some holes I dug for myself during my first few months on the board."

"You're kidding."

"Wish I was. It's all part of learning your role."

"Was I wrong to call the superintendent?"

"Not necessarily. But you and Mildred don't know each other very well. Not much mutual trust yet. Is it true that you asked her to do something about the situation?"

"Probably. I don't remember exactly what I said."

"Mildred thinks the way a lot of superintendents do: She can't do anything without a majority of the board behind her. This is your first request. She wants you as an ally."

"But I didn't want to get everyone mad at me—particularly at Pico. Chris goes to school there!"

"Mildred could have handled your call better. She could have used this as a learning opportunity. A teachable moment, as educators like to say. A chance to talk about your role."

"Terrific! I'm only on the board for a month, and I'm already in a mess. The worst thing is, I still don't know what I did wrong," groaned Sheila.

"You're a public figure now. People will often magnify whatever you say and do. If they want your support, they may be too quick to do what you ask. If they see you as an enemy, they'll attack you even for something you thought was pretty minor."

"Maybe I should just resign from the board and move to another state. It's bad enough that I feel stupid, but what if my kids suffer for my mistakes?"

"There might be a time or two in the short term when Chris and Amy wish their mother never got on the school board. But later they'll feel proud of their mom. And learn from her example."

"Not if I keep sticking my foot in my mouth."

"You won't. You'll learn to be more aware of what you can do and what you can't do. For example, you don't supervise teachers. That's the job of the administrators you hire. It's fine to give information to the superintendent. Just make sure it doesn't sound like a command. That's the job of the board as a whole."

"Thanks, Fran, for being straight with me."

"It's the kind of feedback I wish I'd gotten when I was new on the board. There were times when people seemed to be acting funny. I wouldn't find out until weeks later that they were upset about something I'd done. Even people I knew pretty well treated me differently once I became a board member."

"All I need is to have my kids' principal mad at me and have to find out about it secondhand."

"Jaime's young, but he'll be a good principal. Talk to him. I think you and he will like each other."

"I hope so," said Sheila, feeling little conviction.

"I'm sure," Fran replied. "Bye for now. Gotta run."

Sheila sat at the kitchen table. Her face was flushed. She felt nervous. There's a lot more to learn about this business, she thought. A lot more.

SIGNPOST 2
Finding a Role

In any group or organization, people need to know where they're headed, who's in charge, what they're supposed to do, and how their efforts relate to others'. Putting talented people into a confusing structure wastes their energy and undermines their effectiveness. Structural arrangements, like human needs, need continual attention, review, and realignment. Part of a school board's mission is to set direction and establish districtwide policy. Too often, the board itself suffers from structural flaws.

Like many new board members, Sheila Daly began her career with only a vague idea of what she was supposed to do and how she should work with others. School boards weren't designed to maximize role confusion, but Sheila could be forgiven for thinking so. She ran aground on almost all of the possible areas for conflict and ambiguity. Let's look at each of them.

What's My Role in Relation to the Board?

At her first board meeting, Sheila found herself wondering about questions that face every new board member: How do things work around here? What am I supposed to be doing? She enlisted Fran's help. Why don't we make decisions more systematically like we did in my old firm? Why don't we respond directly to issues that are brought before us? Who's really in charge: Ben, Mildred, or the majority? Fran helped her grasp the limits of rationality in school board work and decipher the crucial distinction between policymaking and micromanagement.

It helps if you are fortunate enough to be on a well-structured board that provides thorough briefings to new members. More likely,

it will be on-the-job, trial-and-error learning. You study how the board operates. You watch what other board members do. Gradually, you get a better sense of the roles that you can assume. In time, you'll find a role that fits your own talents and interests as well as the possibilities within your particular board.

What's My Role as an Individual Versus a Member of a Group?

Legally, board members are like state legislators or members of congress: Their only formal power is a seat at the table and the right to vote on anything that the board considers. Informally, it's fuzzier and more complicated. Individual board members do have informal clout, which can be both a blessing and a curse. The good news is that you have more access and people are more likely to pay attention to you. The bad news is that they often overreact, as Mildred did to Sheila's inquiry about a particular student. One board member in an urban district was touring a high school and happened to ask the principal why a water cooler was placed in a particular corner. She was stunned when she came back through half an hour later to see that the water cooler had been moved.

Board members need to use their informal influence wisely. Giving orders that they have no authority to give or asking for unreasonable personal favors distorts and undermines the governance process. Board members who abuse their positions lose personal credibility and breed perceptions among staff or community members that the board is politically corrupt.

Which Hat Am I Wearing?

As Sheila discovered, you don't forgo your rights as a parent or a citizen when you join a school board. But things can get complicated quickly if you're not clear about which hat you're wearing. As a parent, Sheila had every right to ask questions about how Pico's principal and teachers were guarding her child's safety. But, as Fran reminded her, supervising principals and teachers is not part of an individual board member's responsibility. Teachers and principals rarely want to offend board members. They usually want to be responsive, but they don't want to be abused or manipulated.

This creates an extra burden on board members to clarify which hat they're wearing as they interact with school staff. This can be as simple as saying explicitly, "I'm speaking as a parent, not as a board member."

What's the Relationship Between the Board and the Administration?

This is a perennially vexing question for boards of every kind: in corporations, hospitals, public agencies, and, of course, school districts. Legally, boards have responsibility for and authority over just about everything. In practice, their ability to control what goes on day-to-day is very limited. Particularly in larger districts, board members have neither the expertise nor the time to supervise everything. When they try to micromanage, they are likely to make things worse rather than better.

The temptations are very strong. Constituents bring all sorts of complaints to your attention. Typically, they expect you to do something about their concerns. You can and should serve as an information conduit and an honest broker among staff, parents, students, and community. You can share information and ideas that help parties see the big picture or identify problems as they arise. It made sense for Sheila to call the administration's attention to a possible problem in an elementary classroom. It does not make sense to try to substitute her judgment for the professionals' in responding to the issue. Nor does it make sense to try to develop board "policy" to cover every problem that arises in the schools. It's easy for a board to make lots of bad policies, but impossible to make lots of good ones. Too often, boards proceed with little sense of priority, focusing their limited time, attention, and expertise on a lot of minor problems instead of the relatively few major issues that come up. The results: rules and red-tape that hamstring professionals in applying their expertise and judgment. Schools become hampered in responding to local problems by overly broad and inflexible districtwide policies and procedures. Staff play it safe by following the rules no matter how misguided those rules may seem in individual situations. Citizens are frustrated and enraged by bureaucratic rigidity in the schools.

Role confusion is built into your job as a school board member. It will return periodically to haunt every board. Awareness of the issues, vigilance, and continued dialogue can help to minimize confusion and conflict and maximize effective use of the board's resources.

Sorting Out the Politics

Ten o'clock. Her quiet time. Kids in bed. Ted away on a business trip. A chance to pore over her board packet, nursing a cup of chamomile tea. There was so much information to digest. Sheila relished this rare time to consider her options and figure out what to do.

The telephone rang. It was Ben Bradshaw. She hardly recognized his voice at first. He seemed rattled. Tension came through over the phone. "We've got a hot potato here. Everyone wants something different. No one wants to bend an inch."

He was talking about the plans for the new school. Struggles over the project had dominated Sheila's first month on the board. Everything had supposedly been settled when the parties reached a compromise. Funds were allocated. A site was selected. It wasn't even on the agenda for tomorrow night's meeting. Sheila had been focusing on other issues.

"I thought it was all worked out. We've got the votes, don't we? We need to get going."

"That's what I thought—until half an hour ago."

"What changed?"

"Remember we had to check the site with the National Preservation Commission?"

"I thought that was just a formality."

"Me too. But they say we have to get an archaeologist to do some test borings."

"Test borings? We're not drilling for oil. We want to build a school. What are they looking for?"

"Bones. Native American remains. That land used to belong to the Quamicut Tribe. The commission says it might be an old burial ground."

Sheila moaned. "Ben, if that's true, we're sunk. We can't build on sacred ground."

Ben paused. "Well, not necessarily. Some people think we should go ahead. Anywhere else is going to cost more. We also have a sacred duty to the taxpayers."

Sheila felt her shoulders tighten. She didn't want to argue with Ben, but she didn't see any other choice. "No way, Ben," she said forcefully. "We can't desecrate a burial site to save a few dollars. Do you think the Quamicut won't fight us? Wouldn't you if someone wanted to dig up the Rosehill Cemetery where your folks are buried?"

"Sheila, we're not going to settle this tonight. I just wanted to warn you before the board meeting. Remember, we all agreed. No surprises."

"This wasn't a surprise?"

"I'm talking about open meetings. We've added a new item to our agenda. We need to approve the hiring of an archaeologist—a professor from the university. We can't do anything until she tells us what's there. See you tomorrow night."

Sheila pushed her board packet aside and went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. She needed more time to sort things out, and she needed something stronger than chamomile. It was going to be a long night.

The aroma of fresh coffee revived her spirits. The battle over the new school had been going on for several years. Just about every group in town seemed to have an ax to grind. The Rosehill Taxpayers Association had dug in their heels at the outset. Why, the group asked, did the district need more space when the student population had been stable? Told that new space was mandated for special programs, the taxpayers responded, "Fine, let the special programs

pick up the bill." When reminded that funds for special programs also came from taxpayers, the Association countered with a proposal to save money by adding space to an existing school.

That brought screams of protest from the parents of special needs students, who were out in force at every board meeting. "A special wing will mean segregating our children. It's against state law and the district's own inclusion policy. We want our kids in regular programs in their home schools." Gene Lorenzo was an active pipeline between the board and special education advocates. He made sure they knew about meeting times and got at least their share of the board's agenda.

A group of senior citizens sided with the Rosehill Taxpayers Association. "We're living on fixed incomes, and taxes are too high already. Do you want to force us out of our homes?"

Many parents, on the other hand, argued passionately for the new school. "We can't go on shortchanging our children," they said. "There's no space for art or music classes. One school nurse is working out of an old broom closet. Another school had to put their library on the auditorium stage. There's no place to put computers. We've been trying to Band-Aid® our space problems for years, and we've wasted a lot of money on temporary fixes. It's time to do the right thing."

The teachers union agreed with parents. The union pointed to overcrowded classrooms and cases where two teachers had classes in the same room. There was no place for teachers to prepare lessons. Teachers' lounges were cramped and ugly.

Sheila's stomach tightened as she thought about the warring factions, each with an entrenched position. Somehow, the board had managed to develop a proposal with which most groups could live. Back to square one, she thought. For someone who didn't like conflict, this was discouraging news. She sighed, poured the rest of her coffee into the kitchen sink, and headed for bed. As she passed the kids' rooms, she tucked each one in. Seeing them gave her courage for the fight ahead.

When she arrived at the meeting next evening, she flinched. Lines of cars were parked outside. A bad sign. She pushed her way through

the overflow crowd into the gym. She said hello to people she recognized, but many of the faces were unfamiliar. She was pretty sure that a number of them were Quamicuts. She tried to smile. Almost no one else seemed to. Faces were glum.

The gym was packed. Every group in town must be out in force, Sheila thought. Fearfully, she anticipated the full-fledged conflict that lay ahead. She was glad to see Mary Martinez, and the two exchanged a brief hug. She quickly scanned her board colleagues, trying to anticipate where each would come down on the school site issue. Mary Martinez and Clyde Poole, the only minority members of the board, would agree with her: You don't build a school on a burial ground. Gene Lorenzo would go the other way: He cared a lot more about today's special needs students than about people who died a few centuries back. His tablemate, Shirley Poole, was for God and against taxes. If the Quamicut had been Christians in the old days, Shirley would have defended their cemetery. Because they weren't, she'd probably defend the taxpayers. That left Ben Bradshaw and Beverly Billings. She figured Ben didn't care much about the substance of the issue. Mostly he'd be looking for a way out of the mess with as little pain as possible. And Beverly? She could be the key. A partner in a local accounting firm, she certainly wanted value for money in the schools. But she was thoughtful and she cared about educational quality. If we get Beverly, we'll get Ben too, Sheila told herself. She began to feel a little more hopeful.

She looked out at the overflow crowd. Even with more than the usual number of folding chairs, it was still standing room only. The energy level was high. Faces were tense. Like gladiators about to enter the arena, Sheila thought. Only James Rickman, the reporter, and Martha Platt, a retired, avid board watcher, seemed to be relishing what lay ahead. Another long, painful night. Then Sheila heard the rap of Ben's large mahogany gavel.

As a late entry, the building site issue was next to last on the agenda. The crowd grew more and more impatient, fidgeting through discussions of athletic schedules, out-of-town field trips, and expenditure approvals. It was getting late. The restless crowd clearly wanted the main event.

There was a stir in the audience as Ben finally put the school site issue on the table. Mildred described the new developments in a

calm, professional tone. She added something Sheila hadn't heard from Ben. Tribal documents indicated that Chief Akanda, one of the tribe's most beloved leaders, was buried at the site. Ben polled the board members. Sheila's heart was in her throat, but she stated her view forcefully. "We cannot compromise sacred land—not for any reason."

"Hold on," said Beverly Billings without waiting for formal recognition from Ben. "Why not view this discovery as a windfall, rather than an obstacle? If we have an important Indian leader buried here, why shouldn't Rosehill make something of it? Organizations like National Geographic fund this kind of thing. Maybe they'll pay to have the remains properly excavated and placed in a museum. Or maybe the state will declare the site a monument or something. There may be some real tax breaks here. We need to—"

Gene Lorenzo cut her off. "The reality is that our children need a new school building—and sooner, not later. Children, especially those with severe handicaps, are being shortchanged every day. Education delayed is education denied. Moreover, delay will only cost the taxpayers more! We have to go ahead—whatever this professor discovers."

Mary Martinez responded immediately. Her voice was soft, but firm. "No, we must wait until the dig is completed. Remember, if this were a Christian cemetery, we would find a new site. No questions asked. I feel very strongly about this. I will not tolerate insensitivity to Native American heritage."

Ben Bradshaw tried to regain control of the rapidly deteriorating situation. He reminded the group that one more item remained on the agenda. As he finished, Thomas Blackburn, the Quamicut tribal historian, rose to his feet. He spoke softly, calmly, in a strong voice. "We anxiously await the results of the archaeological exploration. Until then, we expect you will make no moves. You would not disturb the burial site of President Kennedy. Likewise, we will not accept any violations of the graves of Chief Akanda and our ancestors. You must realize the importance of this land to us. Sacred land cannot be disturbed without serious consequences."

Hands shot up everywhere in the room. Sheila moved to postpone further discussion until the archaeologist reported. Mary Martinez seconded. To Sheila's surprise, the motion passed unanimously. Ben called for a short break.

The crowd was thinner after the break, but not by as much as Sheila had expected or hoped. It was after ten o'clock. Did that many people really want to talk about the district's inclusion policy this late at night?

"Just how inclusive is our policy going to be, is the main question," Mildred began. "State policy gives us considerable leeway, and other districts are choosing a variety of approaches. To cut to the quick, the real issue is how to deal with children with severe multiple handicaps. Bill Cavalo, our assistant superintendent for Special Education, believes that true inclusion places such children in the regular classroom. He's prepared a brief that explains his philosophy. It also lists the potential problems. It's in your board packet."

Gene Lorenzo interrupted. "No discussion is necessary. As a board, we should direct Mr. Cavalo to draft a policy supporting full inclusion. No one who believes in equity for all students can take any other stand."

"That's pretty strong, Gene," countered Mary Martinez. "You all know where I stand on equity issues. I am on record and firmly committed. But I'm not sure that complete integration always means equity. We have to consider what's good for *all* students. Some children with severe handicaps may be better served outside regular classrooms, just as some children's language needs can be best met in targeted ESL programs. Children can be just as excluded in regular classrooms as they are in special programs!"

"That brings up another issue," said Shirley Poole. "Some of these students need more help than our teachers should have to provide. You know what I mean. Kids with support system tubes and stuff. Kids who need to be carried from place to place. Kids with bandages that need to be changed all the time. My niece is studying to be a teacher. She certainly didn't bargain for these kinds of duties. She's not being trained as a nurse. We'll have to supply special aides and support personnel to provide these added services. Do you know what that will do to our budget?"

"I object!" shouted a parent from the audience. He ignored Ben's attempt to gavel him out of order. "My daughter has multiple handicaps. Spina bifida. You're talking about my daughter as if she were some kind of freak. She does need some extra physical attention—but her mind deserves the same opportunities as her peers. How

can you speak of equity if she doesn't have the same chance everyone else does?"

Gene Lorenzo immediately came to the support of the parent. "Thank you very much, Mr. Murphy. I'm sure we all understand your feelings. And I remind the board that external placement of these children will cost a lot more than a few extra classroom aides!"

The room was buzzing again. Hands were raised everywhere. Bradshaw called for order. The audience finally subsided, but board members continued to wrangle. Finally, Mildred suggested cautiously, "Perhaps we're not quite ready to recommend a policy tonight. I suggest you reread the materials Bill has prepared on inclusion."

Ben agreed. "Let's be prepared to consider a policy next meeting."

Sheila, quiet during most of the debate, spoke up. "Ben, I feel a need for more information. I've read Bill Cavalo's memo. I understand what Mr. Lorenzo and Mrs. Poole are saying. But Ms. Martinez raised an important question. So did Mr. Lorenzo with his reference to cost. Could the superintendent prepare some additional data? What's the research on full inclusion? What's the impact on students—those with handicaps and those without? What about costs? If we do go to full inclusion, do we get any extra help from the state?"

Everyone was tired. All agreed that more information might help. The superintendent promised a report in the next board packet. Wearily, Ben adjourned the meeting. A wired, but tired, board filed out of the room, wondering what lay ahead.

As she drove home from the meeting, Sheila's head was reeling. How can we make policies when everyone has a different agenda? She could hardly wait for her next meeting with Fran. It had become a regular event. Each Friday, Fran would stop by Sheila's house on her way to work. For Sheila, it was a chance to reflect on her experiences. It helped her figure out what was really going on and what to do about it. Fran seemed to enjoy their Friday meetings as much as Sheila did. Fran liked keeping up with board doings. Even more, she liked sharing her experience with Sheila.

The coffee was waiting when Fran arrived. After brief pleasantries, Sheila got right to the point. "Fran, I'm frustrated. Last night's

meeting went almost five hours. Five hours of anger, of people talking past each other. No decisions. No policy. No agreements. All that effort, but nothing accomplished. It's like a jungle."

"And everyone fights so hard to get to the water hole that *nobody* gets any water?"

"Exactly!"

"Your jungle image is right on. I used to feel the same way."

"That's supposed to be comforting?" Sheila frowned.

Fran looked at her with a trace of a smile. "What do you expect if there's not enough water to go around?"

"Everyone tramples everyone else. But that's so depressing!"

"Maybe not, if the animals get a little smarter. They might realize they're better off working with others, instead of going it alone."

"But how can people work together when they can't agree on anything?"

"Disagreeing on some things doesn't mean disagreeing on everything. You know what politics is really about? Looking for common ground among people who disagree with each other."

"How?"

"Sometimes more information helps, especially if it makes it easier for people to agree on what the issues are."

"So I did the right thing. I asked Mildred to get us more data on inclusion. I was hoping that would help us find common ground."

"It might help. It might not."

"Why not?"

"You're not designing a bridge. With engineering problems, better analysis generally means better answers. With political differences, more information may just sharpen the conflict."

Sheila groaned. "Oh, no! You mean I might have made things worse again?"

"Are people already pretty fixed in their positions?"

"Frozen."

"Is more information really going to thaw things out?"

"Probably not," Sheila conceded glumly. "They'll probably just use the data to support what they already believe. Take Gene Lorenzo. He'll support full inclusion no matter what Mildred's report says. And Shirley will oppose anything that's not the way it was thirty years ago."

"And you?"

"I'm for inclusion with limits. I'll never support disturbing a gravesite. Small wonder we're stuck!"

"It's hard. Heaven knows!"

"So I'm just another animal stomping around the water hole. What else can I do?"

"You get smart—politically." Fran grinned. "That's what I did."

"You mean compromise? That's easy for you to say—you're off the board."

"You don't compromise over basic principles—or your core values. But there may be plenty of room for negotiation about how to get there."

Sheila thought for a minute. "Like when Mary said last night that she supported equity, but wasn't sure full inclusion was the right route?"

"Exactly. If you really believe your position is right, don't give it up. But don't stop listening, either. You need to hear from the different parties so you can map the terrain."

"What terrain?"

"The political lay of the land. Three P's: players, purposes, and power."

"Run that by again."

"Take the burial ground issue. If it's a game, who are the players? Who might make a difference in how the game goes?"

"The board, of course."

"Start there."

"Well, I was thinking about this at the meeting. Right now, I think we've got three people who want to protect a burial ground, three who just want to build a school, and Ben . . ."

"Who I'll bet is looking for the middle ground."

"You know Ben pretty well."

"Who's in which camp?"

"Mary, Clyde, and I all agree. There's no way we're going to disturb a sacred site."

"So you already have some allies."

"I suppose so. But calling them allies makes it sound like we're fighting a war."

"That's the cynical view."

"Is there another?"

"Sure. Just practical problem solving when you've got conflict. So who's on the other side?"

"Well, Gene wants whatever helps special needs students. He doesn't want a delay. Shirley Poole wants to save money and preserve tradition. Her tradition, anyway. Maybe not the Quamicuts'."

"Might she be persuaded that it serves her own interests to defend their traditions as well?"

"That's a very interesting idea!" Sheila said enthusiastically. "Why not?"

"That's the whole idea in politics. You try to bring people together around a particular direction even though they support it for different reasons. That's why you have to understand what other players care about. You're looking for a solution that solves your problem and their problem at the same time."

"We need at least one more person on our side."

"Right. More would be even better."

"We can probably get Beverly if we talk to her about costs. Lawyers, lawsuits, delays—all that stuff," Sheila mused.

"Sounds like you can get the votes on the burial ground issue."

"Everyone but Gene. He votes a straight ticket for special education."

"Don't write Gene off yet. If you cast him as an enemy, he may act like one."

"So what do I do?"

"Shower Gene with respect. Acknowledge his concerns. Respond to them as well as you can."

"Why go to all that trouble?"

"This is only one in a long series of issues. There will be times you'll need his help. Make an enemy now, and you might regret it down the line. He might rally opposition to something you really care about."

Sheila nodded. "Everything you say makes sense. It's just that I don't like to think of myself as a politician." As she listened to her own words, she realized how strange they sounded. Then she started to laugh. "I was thinking there were so many different positions that we'd never find any common ground. Now I think we can reach a decision that pleases nearly everyone."

"Don't expect to please everybody. Even if your colleagues agree, there will be plenty of people who won't buy in. You'll get some flak. It comes with the job. If you believe in what you're doing, though, it's worth it."

"I hope so. On the burial site, I feel very strongly that my position is right."

"Then you've got a responsibility. Do the best you can to win your case."

"So you're saying fight for what I really believe, but fight smart."

"Exactly. Some board members are passionate about their agenda, but don't understand politics. A lot of times they hurt their own cause. Others are politically savvy, but don't know what they believe in. But when you put integrity and political skills together, it's pretty powerful."

As Sheila nodded thoughtfully, Amy ran into the room and pounced on her lap. "Sesame Street must be over," Sheila said. She looked lovingly at her daughter. Fran finished her coffee, gave Amy a hug, and walked to the door. "It's not easy. But you're on the right track."

"No, it's not easy. But Amy just reminded me why I'm doing it."

SIGNPOST 3
Coping With School Politics

Because public schools are so important as a primary gateway (or gatekeeper) for each new generation, they inevitably become a battleground on which many of our most powerful and agonizing social and political conflicts are aired and contested. In recent decades, school politics have only intensified, often to the point of bitterness and gridlock. In part, this is the natural outcome of growing pluralism: more groups with more interests, all hoping that the schools will respond to their concerns and values. It also reflects growing resource pressures: continual demands from a variety of stakeholders to keep doing more and more, sometimes with less and less.

School boards are a focal point for all these debates. They were designed to be that way. Many other developed nations have placed

control of the schools primarily in the hands of professionals in a national education agency. That solution significantly reduces local school politics but also tends to make schools more responsive to central officials than to local communities. America's abiding faith in local democracy has led us to make a different choice. The challenge of making that choice work falls squarely on school boards.

Sheila's initial response to school politics is typical of many new school board members: disbelief, frustration, and puzzlement. Why does it have to be that way? Who wants to be at the center of so much conflict? Why should we have to suffer so many attacks from so many different directions? How can we do anything in such a contentious environment?

The process of planning a new school provided Sheila's baptism of fire in the political realities of her new role. Every group in town had a different stake in the decision. Each wanted to get its own way. The same conditions held for the district's inclusion policy. There, too, Sheila encountered multiple agendas, competing pockets of power, and divisive disputes resistant to rational resolution.

Fran offered a dose of both reality and hope. The reality is that divergent interests and scarce resources make politics unavoidable. The hope is that if Sheila is able to "get smart politically," she will have a better understanding of what is going on and a better chance of making the political process produce positive educational outcomes. Fran provided several signposts for pointing the direction to positive politics.

Map the Terrain

Board members need a map of the political landscape to plot a workable strategy. The mapping process begins with three key questions:

1. *Who are the key players?* Who are the people, or groups, who care about the issue at hand? Will they care enough to support or oppose you? Who will, or might, make a difference in how things turn out? Whose help is necessary? Whose opposition is too important to ignore?

2. *What is the interest of each of the key players or groups?* That is, what stake does each key player have in this issue? What does each party want, and what can you do to help them get at least part of what they care about?

3. *How much power does each player have?* Who is likely to have the greatest influence over how this issue turns out? What is the source of power for each key player? Who could help if their power was mobilized? Are there any "sleeping dogs" better left undisturbed?

The answers to those questions make it possible to draw a map of the political field: a two-dimensional figure in which the vertical axis represents power and the horizontal axis represents position, or interest. Each of the important parties can be placed on the field in a position corresponding to where they are likely to fall out. Sheila was doing this implicitly in her conversation with Fran as she developed hunches about where different board members would position themselves on the new school issue. She was sure, for example, that Clyde and Mary would agree with her but that Sheila and Gene might take the opposite view. This suggested that Beverly and Ben were likely to cast the decisive votes.

Search for Common Interests

In responding to Sheila's discouragement, Fran told her that manipulation and coercion are not the only options. Once you understand the players and their agendas, it becomes possible to build bridges across seemingly wide chasms. It is often possible to find common interests even with people who initially appear to be enemies. Sheila's first thought was that Shirley Poole would automatically vote for a new school, even over a Native-American cemetery, if it saved money. But then she realized that Shirley's religious convictions might lead her in the opposite direction.

Building coalitions among different groups whose interests are partly aligned and partly not is at the heart of the political process. It is a calculus that school board members often fail to understand. Values and ideologies are often nonnegotiable, but many real-world decisions raise multiple values that cut in different directions. They

are rarely clear-cut choices between good and evil. Moreover, both board members and their constituents are often much more flexible over means than ends. That is why it is often possible for people with different values to support the same decision: They just support it for different reasons.

Once you have mapped the terrain for any given issue, you can employ the strategies of effective and constructive politicians:

1. *Clarify your agenda.* You are clear on your agenda when you have both a vision of where you want to go and a strategy for getting there.

2. *Build relationships and alliances.* Work on building relationships with the key players. Spend time with them and find out how they think, what's important for them, and what they would like from you. The better your relationships, the more likely you are to build support and defuse opposition.

3. *Facilitate the opposition.* Talk to potential opponents. Listen to them, and ask questions to make sure that you really understand how they think and what they care about. Acknowledge the importance of their perspectives. Encourage them to engage in a dialogue with the people they disagree with.

4. *Encourage the expression of conflict.* It is tempting but dangerous to ignore conflict or to sweep it under the rug in the hope that it will go away. People need a chance to voice their own concerns and to hear other people's concerns. Otherwise, they usually get even.

5. *Negotiate.* As you get clearer on what you and other key players want, you can engage in conversations with them about options and possibilities for "win-win" solutions. It is an ongoing search guided by the question, What can we do that might work for all of us?

Getting Together

Early March. Chilly. Sheila sat in her living room, looking out at the front yard. A light rain was falling, but she could see a few faint glimmerings of spring. She needed these early signs of hope. Every school board meeting made winter seem longer and drearier. Then she saw Fran coming up the front walk. She smiled and went to open the door.

"You've got some crocuses peeking out in your front yard. Pretty."

"Spring can't come soon enough."

"This winter wasn't so bad."

"You're not on the school board."

"It's still getting to you?"

"They heat the high school gym, but it still feels cold every time we meet." Sheila spoke with mingled tones of regret and sadness. "I had this weird dream the other night. I'd been exiled to Siberia. The whole board was there. All in the same gulag. We completely ignored each other. We had to work all the time, but nothing ever got done."

"Sounds depressing. And lonely."

"That's exactly how I feel. Like I'm not a person anymore, just a school board member. No one talks to *me*. They talk to my role."

Fran smiled and nodded. "I used to feel that way a lot. One of the best things about being off the board is that I'm not afraid to go to the supermarket anymore. No more worrying that someone will corner me."

"That's no help! Is there any way to get time off for good behavior? I'm not sure I can take three more years of this."

"You can. In fact, I'm willing to bet you'll run for reelection."

"You're on. Loser buys dinner at La Trattoria?"

"Done."

Sheila smiled broadly. "The bet's another reason to keep meeting with me. I'll never make it otherwise. You're the only person who really understands how I'm feeling."

"How about your colleagues? Some of them probably feel the same way."

"How would I know? I hardly know them."

"Have you been doing your political homework?"

"You mean networking? Schmoozing with my colleagues? Working the telephone? Absolutely!"

"Is it working?"

Sheila frowned. "Well, yes. Like Beverly and I are seeing eye to eye on a lot of things. Gene's starting to see me as a potential friend rather than an ardent enemy on special education. It's still pretty much all business. We're all wearing masks. We never take them off."

"You, too?"

Sheila stopped to ponder the question. "Probably. Except with Mary. She's the only person on the board I trust. What a terrible feeling! I work with people but don't trust them. Does it ever get any better?"

"There's no guarantee. What really made a difference for me was our board retreat."

"Ben's mentioned it a few times. He seems to think it was great, but he's kind of vague about what happened."

"It's hard to pin down. In some ways we didn't do very much. The most important thing was the informal time. Just getting away together. Getting to know one another."

"What were you supposed to be doing?"

"A workshop on strategic planning. We brought in a professor from the university. Under the open meeting law, we couldn't do any official business. But we did talk a lot about the district's mission."

"Did you get anywhere?"

"Not on the mission. But more than I expected on our relationships. We got to understand each other better. And we were more honest with each other. I'll never forget yelling at Ben to get off the fence."

"Apparently, the advice didn't take."

"Actually, it helped. Not forever, maybe. But for a while he really took it to heart. The thing I remember best, though, is a walk with Clyde Poole after dinner. He started talking about his daughter."

"The one who was killed?"

"Shot. In the head. By a 16-year-old boy who was aiming for someone else."

"I remember reading about it in the papers. She was in the hospital a long time, wasn't she?"

"Months in a coma before she finally died. I'd heard the story, but never from Clyde. He wanted me to understand how it influenced his work on the board. We became good friends that night." Fran paused to wipe a tear from her eyes. "We're still friends."

Silence. The two friends looked at one another, then hugged.

"I envy you," Sheila finally said.

"Why?"

"I have no idea how to get closer to my colleagues."

"Mostly, it's just time and persistence. Ask people to lunch."

"I'm doing that already."

"Mostly talking about board business?"

"True."

"Get them to tell their story."

"What story?"

"Everyone has a story. I used to talk to Beverly a lot. On first impression, she comes across pretty frosty. Never married. No children."

"Why'd she want to get on the board?"

"Very involved in her sister's family. She's kind of taken on the schools as an extended family. Money's been an issue in her life. She grew up poor. Successful now, but she's been supporting her-

self and her mother. Her mother's had serious health problems. On the surface, Bev's a tough cookie. When you get behind her mask, she's very interesting. Once we began to share our feelings, we used to have a good hoot together."

"Maybe I could do that with Mary. The others don't seem very interested."

"Show them you're interested in them. And look for opportunities to share yourself as well."

"Like?"

"I remember surprising people when I spoke out against the district's proposed absence policy. I talked about the time I skipped school to go to my brother's wedding in San Francisco. My dad talked to Bill Bauer, the high school principal. It didn't help. Mr. Bauer still put me in detention for four weeks. But it was a great wedding. My first trip to California. I learned a lot."

The phone interrupted. Sheila answered reluctantly. It was Fran's secretary. Fran was already late for her nine a.m. meeting.

"Sorry, Fran. My fault."

"It was worth it. I wish we had more time. There's a lot in this personal connection stuff. Your colleagues are real people. With real needs. And lives to share."

The high school gym. Another meeting. Mostly routine. Then Mildred casually mentioned a request for proposals from the state department of education. "The state thinks school boards need training in how to do self-assessment. They're willing to fund workshops. I would like to write up a proposal for a board retreat. What is your pleasure?"

Shirley Poole was first to respond. She delivered a brief monologue on the evils of "sensitivity sessions." Ben asked for other views. Sheila looked around the table. She sensed that the idea might die for lack of any other response. Time to move, she thought.

"Let me build on Mrs. Poole's comment. She pinpointed what we don't need. We don't want to waste time and money on navel-gazing trivia. On the other hand, this could be a great opportunity for us to do something good for us and for the district. Ben, a question: Didn't the board have a workshop about four years ago?"

Once Ben confirmed that the previous workshop had been a success, momentum built quickly to support the superintendent's proposal.

"Mildred," said Sheila, "can we hold the workshop off-site? Just the board members and the superintendent? Isn't it true that the open meeting law lets us meet in closed session for training?"

"That's right," the superintendent responded. "And it won't cost much. We can probably use the county's conference center at Piedmont Park."

After brief discussion, the board charged the superintendent to proceed. Sheila was delighted, but still nervous.

"I just hope this works," she whispered to Mary.

"Looks good so far," Mary responded.

"You've got a death grip on the steering wheel," Mary commented with a genial laugh. "Are you nervous about what we've gotten ourselves into?"

Sheila tried to act relaxed. She couldn't. "I'm terrified. Aren't you?"

"In Spanish we say, *No hay mal que por bien no venga.* It can't be so bad that we don't get something good out of it."

"I hope so. I'm worried because I pushed the board to do this. I feel so responsible for what happens."

"We *all* made the decision. Don't take so much responsibility—unless you really *enjoy* being burdened."

"You're right." Sheila grinned sheepishly. "Want to know something? I envy you. You never seem to get uptight. You always seem so confident."

"Confident?" Mary sounded surprised. "Confident about what?"

"About where you fit in."

"As a board member? The only thing I'm confident about is that I don't fit in at all!"

"I'm surprised. Do you ever feel lonely as a board member?"

"All the time. But then again, I don't have your advantages. My dad wasn't on the school board. I don't come from one of Rosehill's leading families."

Even though Mary's tone was light, Sheila winced as she felt the sarcasm.

"Sorry, Sheila," Mary said. "I get angry when I feel I'm being ignored. Or dismissed. I don't mean to take it out on you."

"It's OK," said Sheila. "I never knew you felt that way. It feels like I've been on the losing end more often than you. Remember the debate about allowing ads at high school football games?"

"A tough call."

"I was the only one who said we shouldn't do it. You were part of the majority."

"Maybe you didn't hear me at the time. I didn't think it was a great idea either. But I figured we could use the money for kids who can't afford uniforms. You seemed to be against it just because the field wouldn't look as pretty."

Sheila frowned. "You think the only thing I read is *House and Garden*?"

Mary laughed. "Not quite. But I do see you as someone who had it all handed to her on a silver platter. Prominent family. Friends of all the VIPs in town. Everything's easy."

"Easy? What makes you think it's so easy?"

"You're not working. You've got a husband to support you. Try being a single mother. Holding down a job, taking care of your kids, *and* being on the school board."

"No, I'm not a single mother," Sheila shot back. She was hurt, angry, almost shouting. "But does that mean I'm the enemy?"

"Maybe not. But it makes it easier for you to think a weekend retreat is a great idea!" Mary had never sounded so intense. "*You've* got someone to stay home with your kids."

"If you feel that way, why didn't you say something before?"

"How could I? Everyone else seemed to like the idea. If I'd said no because of my family situation, what kind of credibility would that buy with my colleagues?"

"I don't know! But why are we yelling at each other? We both share a lot of the same problems!" Sheila paused, and her voice softened. "Besides, you're the only person on the board I feel I can trust!"

Mary released her tense frown and smiled broadly. "I never knew that."

"How could you? Thinking I'm a spoiled debutante."

"I'm sorry—my own baggage," Mary said. "Can we be friends?"

"I hope so," Sheila replied. "I'll need one at this retreat."

"Me too!"

Sunlight streamed through the windows of the conference center. The room was spartan: unfinished wood on the walls, folding chairs and tables. The board members sat in a shallow horseshoe, facing two consultants and a pair of antique wooden flip charts.

"It's like the dining hall at the church camp I used to go to as a kid," Sheila whispered to Mary.

"You could feed a lot of campers in here." Pointing to a table at the end of the room with drinks, cookies, and fruit, she added, "Must be fifty yards to the snacks."

Just then, Mildred asked for everyone's attention and introduced the two consultants, Bob and Lila Whitley. Both Whitleys seemed youthful, energetic, and genial.

"They look like twins," Mary whispered to Sheila. "Do you suppose they were that way before they got married?"

"That's probably why they liked each other."

After saying how happy she and Bob were to be there, Lila began to talk about the purposes of the workshop. "We have two basic objectives," she said. "To assess how the board works now, and to develop ideas for how it can work better."

Lila then asked the board members to meet in pairs to talk about their hopes and fears for the workshop. Sheila found herself paired with Shirley Poole. Her heart started to sink. Shirley and I never agree on anything, she thought. Looking for a more positive approach, she asked herself what Fran would advise. The answer came to her: Try to learn about Shirley's story.

It worked. Ten minutes wasn't much time, but it was enough. Sheila quickly realized how much Shirley *liked* having someone listen to her.

Sheila played a hunch. "Shirley," she asked, "Do you sometimes feel that I don't listen to you?"

"Maybe you listen, but you don't understand."

"My hope for this workshop is to understand better. Will you help?"

By the time the workshop ended, Sheila and Shirley had talked several more times. They'd talked about their children, shared life histories, and talked about why each of them wanted to be on the board. For the first time, they'd become friends. They still disagreed on many issues, but they liked each other. That had to help.

Fran had been right about the informal time. A long walk with Gene Lorenzo. A late-evening fireside conversation with Clyde Poole. By the end of the workshop, Sheila had made several new friends. She'd never felt better about being on the board, and never felt more hopeful about the board's ability to do something constructive for Rosehill.

SIGNPOST 4
Building Teamwork on the Board

It is easy to forget that board members are, first and foremost, people. They bring their needs and their humanity with them when they engage in board work. They still need to feel safe, to belong, to feel appreciated, and to feel that they make a difference. Sheila found herself troubled by tensions, misunderstandings, and mistrust in her relationships with constituents and with her fellow board members. Fran emphasized that caring, honesty, and listening are central in building more open communication and more trusting relationships.

Fran's model was built on three basic principles:

1. *Open up communication, and communicate a basic sense of caring and respect.* When we disagree with someone, or don't trust them, we often stop listening and move away from them. The problem is that when we shut down, they often shut down as well, leaving us in a stalemate. Fran encouraged Sheila to spend time with her colleagues and ask them about their stories. Instead of focusing only on board business, said Fran, attend to people's humanity, their feelings, aspirations, and concerns. Board work is difficult enough because of inevitable differences in philosophy and interests. It gets a lot worse if board members dislike or disrespect one

another. In fact, relationship problems, even more than substantive disagreements, are usually at the heart of the many notorious examples of board ineffectiveness. The tragedy, of course, is that it is often the students and teachers who suffer the most when boards are unable to do their jobs.

Conversely, when board members take the time to get to know one another and build relationships, difficult and time-consuming as that can be, it becomes much easier to separate personalities from problems and understand each others' actions. This makes it a lot easier for a board to get on with its basic work of governance and policy-making.

2. *Ask for feedback.* Best-selling author Ken Blanchard likes to say that feedback is the breakfast of champions. Adults as well as children learn best in environments that give them clear and timely information on the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, feedback to board members is often delayed, confusing, misleading, or nonexistent. As a result, board members easily become blind to how they're seen and are unable to tell the difference between effective and ineffective actions. Sheila, for example, had no idea of the impact of her early request that Mildred look into a problem at Pico. She might never have understood what happened if Fran had not taken the initiative to provide feedback.

Similarly, Sheila wisely asked Shirley Poole, "Do you feel I don't listen to you?" This request for feedback was an important step in breaking the logjam in their relationship.

3. *Be honest and advocate what you believe in.* People need to know the truth and to know where we stand. As a board member, you are expected to have a point of view and be an advocate for education. The challenge is to communicate in ways that others can hear and understand. It helps a lot to tell the truth in a context of listening, caring, and trust.

Ritual and Celebration

La Trattoria. Sheila glanced across the table at Fran. "How was the seafood pasta?"

"Wonderful!" Fran replied. "I've loved this place ever since it opened. You couldn't have picked a better spot. Even though I haven't even won our bet—yet."

"A very small token of my appreciation. You deserve something special."

Just then, La Trattoria's genial proprietor glided up to their table, bringing his usual aura of casual Italian elegance. Broad smile. Blue blazer. Striped foulard tie knotted casually under a white silk shirt. "You ladies are enjoying your dinner, no? Some dessert? Special tonight we have zabaglione con fragole. Fresh strawberries in a wonderful custard with just a hint of Marsala wine. With espresso or capuccino, you'll love it."

Sheila and Fran glanced at each other, waiting to see who would yield to temptation first.

Sheila caved in first. "OK, Vittorio, bring on the zabaglione!"

"I hate to bring up board stuff," said Fran as she lingered over her capuccino, "but how's the new school coming along?"

"Not out of the woods yet."

"Site problem is all cleared up, isn't it?"

"Thank heavens! What a relief that the Quamicut cemetery *isn't* under the school site."

"One problem solved. Something else on the horizon?"

"More like dead ahead. The problem isn't the school. It's the social service center we're planning to put in it."

"The one they're naming for Margaret Juhl?"

"Right."

"She's a legend in Rosehill. One of the best teachers we ever had."

"Everyone says she'd have loved the idea of an interagency center."

"No doubt. You've probably heard the stories. The box of cereal she kept in her room back when we didn't have school breakfasts. Getting Bill Page to do free dental work for kids who couldn't afford it. Home visits to coach Pico's parents into doing more with their kids."

"That's why we hoped that anything named after Margaret would be Teflon®-coated."

"What's the problem?"

"We're getting flak from people who say a school should be a school."

"What kind of flak?"

" 'Keep social workers out of the schools.' 'Kids need education, not therapy.' Shirley Poole's getting a lot of pressure from her constituents."

"Is Shirley a major road block?"

"Between you and me, no. She'll put on a little show. Make a couple of speeches. Vote against it. But she knows it'll pass. She knows we need it."

"What are you doing about the opposition?"

"Mostly ignoring it."

"Why?"

"We've already got the votes. If we keep it low key, we're hoping it won't turn into a big issue."

"Look at the downside. People may get angrier if they feel dismissed."

"You have a point. That's what I learned from Shirley at the workshop. So what *should* we do?"

"Remember that board meetings are rituals."

"Meaning what?"

"You said yourself that Shirley would put on a show for her constituents."

"True. Like theater."

"Exactly. Ever notice how some people rant and rave at board meetings, then you never see them again? It's expression. A chance to go on stage. Be a star for a few minutes."

"Ben's good at that. He lets people talk—thanks them, tells them how much the board appreciates their input. Then he moves on. Never agrees. Never argues. Always the same script."

"If a ritual is working, you don't keep changing the script."

"But what's the purpose? Just letting people vent?"

"Ritual does more than that. It's also a pathway to building community."

"How?"

"People get a chance to participate. To be part of something larger than themselves. To hear and be heard. To create bonds. Schools are a very important community symbol."

"Symbol of what?"

"Lots of things. Children. Hope. Pride. Identity."

"Identity?"

"Sure. Remember the year Rosehill made it to the state basketball finals?"

"The town went crazy. Even Ted seemed to think it was the biggest thing to hit Rosehill since the Civil War."

"Maybe it was. Those weren't just five boys with a basketball. When they went out on that court, everyone in Rosehill was there too."

"So what's this got to do with the interagency center?"

"Did they have interagency centers when you were in school?"

"No. But times have changed."

"Right. But most people don't even know what an interagency center is, much less why we need one in the new school. We all think we know what schools should look like because we spent so much time there. Symbolically, we expect them to look pretty much like they did when we were students."

"So the center seems pretty strange to people?"

"Unless they have a chance to make sense of it. To understand why it is sensible in terms of what schools need to be now. That's

where a public hearing could make a big difference. Get people out. Let them be heard. Look for common ties."

"One bond is Margaret Juhl."

"Deep down, everyone wants to do something to honor Margaret. You've taken the first step in naming the center for her. Now give people a chance to talk about what the center could mean for kids."

"This is going to take some work."

"It's worth it. If you do it right, things will work out."

Fran had been right again. At first, Sheila had grave doubts. As she sat at the board's hearing on the Juhl Center, she found herself wincing at times. Tough questions. Sharp criticisms. Opinions all over the place. How could they ever pull it all together? Just when it began to seem hopeless, the miracle occurred.

Parents stood up to tell a series of stories about Margaret Juhl. Tales of salvation, of young children on the wrong path before running into a dedicated teacher who simply wouldn't give up. The tale of one forceful and passionate woman was particularly memorable.

"Listen up, all of you. I don't care if you're rich or poor, Black or white—makes no difference. We're all stretched these days. But we care about our kids. We can all use a little help from time to time. I'll never forget what Ms. Juhl did for my son. Did the same for everyone—rich or poor, Black or white. She's not here any more. But the least we can do is to create something in her memory. I know she's watching us right now. She wants us to make sure that all children in Rosehill get the help they need."

Enthusiastic applause made it clear that almost everyone was moved as much as Sheila. Beverly Billings moved for the establishment of the Margaret Juhl Center. Clyde Poole offered a vigorous second. Ben called for a voice vote and the motion carried unanimously. The center was well on its way.

A few days later, Sheila and Fran were again sharing coffee.

"You never got to name a school when you were on the board, did you?" Sheila asked.

"Nope. This is the first new school in a long time."

"The last time we met, you were talking about symbols. I realized—naming a new school is a big deal for Rosehill."

"Exactly."

"I'm trying to put what you taught me into practice. We should make the dedication a big ceremony. Give everyone a chance to be a part of making Rosehill history."

"Sounds good. How?"

"I've been batting ideas around with the other board members. We all agree on an essay contest."

"To name the school?"

"Right. Twenty-five words or less. What we should name the school and why. Anyone in Rosehill can enter. Teachers can use it as a classroom writing exercise. We'll have a panel of judges, and prizes for winners and runners-up."

"Who are the judges?"

"A community panel. Big names and some regular folks."

"Will they decide on the name?"

"No. They'll choose the top three. The board makes the final decision."

"I've heard worse ideas. Go for it!"

Several weeks prior to the ground-breaking, Rosehill was abuzz about the new school. Banners were up all over town. The Rotary Club had provided funding for the essay contest, and the best essays were reprinted in the *Rosehill Courier.* The bank put up a display of children's drawings depicting their image of the new school. The Garden Club was running its own contest to design landscaping for the front entrance. Most people hoped that the board would make the right decision—the name for the new school had to feel *right.*

Saturday dawned sunny and warm. The answer to a lot of prayers, Sheila thought as she woke up. The ground-breaking ceremony was to begin at noon. A lot could still go wrong. The turnout might be a disappointment. The speakers could drone on too long. The dancers might not show up. There might not be enough food. But at least the weather had come through.

As the Daly family van pulled up at the school site, the whole family shared Sheila's excitement. Chris and Ted were peppering her with questions about the event. Even Amy was curious. What could she eat? What would they do with the ground after they broke it?

"Will you look at the crowd!" Sheila exclaimed as they approached the site.

"Good news," said Ted, touching Sheila's hand gently, "You got the whole city behind you. The bad news is there's no place to park."

"No problem," Sheila replied with enthusiasm. "Great day for a walk!"

Reluctantly parting from her family, Sheila worked her way to the temporary platform. On the way, she exchanged greetings with dozens of local politicians, parents, and citizens. We're doing it! We're bringing the community together! Sheila thought to herself.

To her surprise and satisfaction, everything went according to plan. By 12:30, the board, the architect, the superintendent, and the chair of the city council were all outfitted with construction hats and gold-painted shovels.

Ben Bradshaw moved to the microphone. "This school will stand as a symbol of Rosehill's commitment to all of its children. Today we're celebrating both our past and our future. The Margaret Juhl Center looks forward. No other facility in the state brings so many services for children together under one roof. It demonstrates our commitment to serving the full range of children's needs. This new school is also deeply anchored in Rosehill's past. An essay by Suzi Fukami, a fifth-grader at Hillcrest School, convinced us to name the school after one of Rosehill's earliest leaders—Chief Akanda. He is a legend not just to the Quamicut, but to all of us in Rosehill. We hope his spirit will always fill the new Akanda School."

The ovation was enthusiastic and sustained. Ben waited for it to subside before continuing. He introduced the Quamicut tribal historian, who gave a brief talk on the legacy of Chief Akanda, and then a group of Quamicut in traditional costume performed a traditional ceremony of remembrance and dedication.

"Now," said Ben Bradshaw, "let's break ground for the Akanda School."

The ground-breakers moved off the platform toward a small mound of dirt. The architect wielded his shovel and turned over

some dirt. The others followed, each turning over a shovelful. Sheila felt a shiver as she pushed her shovel into the ground. A gigantic cheer rose from the crowd. Akanda School was becoming a reality.

While the ground-breakers posed for pictures, the crowd began to line up for the picnic lunch. It was there that Sheila finally found Ted. Amy was in Ted's arms, but Chris had run off to play with some of his friends. The mood at the picnic was festive. It seemed as if all of Rosehill was there, milling around, chatting about the school and sharing stories about Margaret Juhl, Chief Akanda, and other legendary characters in the town. At one point, Sheila whispered in Ted's ear that the school had given Rosehill a new hero—an ancient Indian chief!

Just then, she felt a squeeze on her arm. She turned to find Fran.

"Congratulations!" Fran said exuberantly. "What a success!"

"You helped every step of the way."

"Look at all the believers! It's hard to imagine anyone ever opposed the school or the center, isn't it?" smiled Fran. "A wonderful ceremony, wasn't it?"

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course," Fran assured her. "Biggest celebration I've seen in a long time. This community is truly behind its schools. And the Rosehill school board supplied the glue."

Driving away from the site of the new Akanda School with her family, Sheila felt an overwhelming sense of satisfaction. As a member of the school board, she was part of that glue.

SIGNPOST 5
Building Confidence and Faith Through Symbols and Celebrations

Too often, board members have a narrowly rational view of their work: gather information, pinpoint problems, make decisions, develop policy, evaluate results, hold the superintendent accountable.

There is a deeper, more powerful dimension to board work. Schools are community symbols. They are emblems of faith in the future and hope for the next generation. They are also museums of virtue.

They house memories and nurture links to the past. In a time when schools and school boards are under fire, boards can play a vital role in infusing passion and purpose into the educational enterprise. Sheila experienced firsthand the joy and pride of providing ceremonial glue to bring the Rosehill community together in support of its schools. Becoming a board member entails both opportunity and responsibility to cultivate your district's culture and to build community spirit in education.

School Board Meetings as Ritual

Sheila's initial impression was that board meetings didn't accomplish anything. What she did not see is that meetings are often as important for what they express as what they produce. Rituals send powerful cultural messages. The drama of board meetings provides engaging community theater. Players read their lines, following age-old scripts. The audience enjoys the entertainment and gets caught up in the plot. Good theater helps both players and audience to engage issues and dilemmas that resist direct, rational solutions.

As a board member, you need to be aware of your role and prepare yourself to contribute to the quality of the drama. Ben Bradshaw's years as a board member had taught him the importance of setting the stage and guiding the drama while giving the players space to create their own roles.

Board meetings, like athletic contests, are rituals that bond people together and help them experience intangible values. Understanding the script, playing your role well, and relating to the audience are as important as making decisions and setting policy. The ritual, drama, and pageantry of the school board can provide a rich source of meaning and faith for parents, teachers, students, and administrators.

The Role of Ceremony in Building Community

The dedication ceremony for the Akanda School brought the Rosehill community together. Like all good ceremonies, it fused past, present, and future in an uplifting festival. The old name for a new school anchored it to tradition and rooted the new enterprise in a powerful spiritual legacy. Reenacting ancient ceremonies pro-

vided an inspiriting counterpoint to the vision of the future embodied in the ground-breaking ceremony. Birth, like death, brings people together. Board members sometimes forget that fantasy and festival are key ingredients for a cohesive community. If boards focus only on test scores, teacher evaluations, budgets, and the bottom line, they undercut the symbolic fabric that fosters spirit and faith. There are worse ways to spend taxpayers' dollars than funding an important ceremonial event. As a board member, you need to look for opportunities to use ceremony as a vehicle for building community spirit and confidence in the schools.

Boards as Anointers of Heroes and Heroines

Heroes and heroines offer tangible human testimony to sacred values and beliefs. Margaret Juhl was one of Rosehill's heroines. Her name on the interagency service center helped people to see it as important and integral to the new school's educational mission. The center embodied much of what Margaret had always tried to do: providing breakfast, arranging dental care for children who couldn't afford it, and all in the interest of an expanded vision of the role of school in the lives of children.

Chief Akanda, a legendary figure in Rosehill's history, represented more than just the values of Rosehill's Native Americans. He symbolized Rosehill's origins as well as its contemporary diversity. His name on the new school brought forward the spirit of the Quamicut Tribe, giving the new school a core identity around which symbols, legends, rituals, ceremonies, and values could be built.

Schools are filled with the exploits of ordinary people who do extraordinary things. Recognizing their achievements on a regular basis is one of the most important things a school board can do to reinforce core values and beliefs.

Telling Stories

Stories carry educational value and shape how people think and feel about their schools. Test scores and other quantitative indices of school performance play an important role, but they can never substitute for stories and anecdotes that ground a school district's aspirations and achievements in the specific deeds of particular

people. School board members need to convene occasions where stories can be shared. Stories about Margaret Juhl powerfully conveyed the spirit of the new interagency center. Sharing those stories infused the center with purpose and brought it to life. Preserving and sharing stories is one of the most powerful ways that school boards can shape the culture of schools.

Balancing Tradition and Innovation

In one way, schools are much like churches or temples. We want them to improve as long as nothing is really different. School board members are both custodians of the past and agents of reform. It is a paradoxical challenge. Finding the right balance is a central part of a board's responsibility. Boards that cling too tightly to the past will stultify the educational process and shortchange a community's children, particularly in an era of change and turbulence. But boards that ignore history and plunge mindlessly into the future risk the loss of their district's heart and soul. Change always brings both loss and gain. Sensitivity to moving ahead without rupturing ties to historical roots is one of a board's most challenging responsibilities.

We hope that Sheila's experiences and Fran's coaching help school board members appreciate that their symbolic role is as important as anything they do. In an era when the confidence of both the public and of educational professionals is at a low ebb, school boards have an opportunity to recognize and sustain confidence and faith in the sacred institution of which they are stewards.

Passing the Torch

Lunch at La Trattoria. To settle a bet. And reconfirm a friendship.

"Today I recommend the Cioppino di Pesce," said Vittorio with his customary enthusiasm. "A very special bouillabaisse with an Italian accent."

"Probably with a very special price. But since my friend is buying," said Fran with a broad smile, "bring me the cioppino."

"No need to rub it in," said Sheila ruefully.

"Think of it this way. We have a lot to celebrate. You won the election. And I won the bet."

"You *were* right. I did run again. I even wanted to win."

"If only I'd been smart enough to figure that you'd be the next board chair. I could have gotten a couple of free lunches out of that one."

"Who ever dreamed that Ben would have a heart attack?"

"That was a shock. He's the kind of guy you just expect to go on forever. But he's back working the phones again. He called me a few days ago. Sounded like his old self."

"I'll never forget when he called me from the hospital. I still can't believe it. Twenty-four hours after his surgery, he wants to tell me I'm his successor."

Fran had heard the story before, but still enjoyed hearing Sheila tell it again. "Shows how much he cared about the school board. Almost more important to him than his business."

"I tried to argue with him. Someone else should be chair. It's too soon. I'm too young. What about Clyde or Beverly? Or Mary? She knows more about education than I do. He kept insisting I was the one."

"He was right."

"I wish I were that sure."

"Just about everyone thinks you did a sensational job in your first term. You took the lead on the board workshop. You were the key to getting Akanda School off on the right foot. You got reelected in a landslide."

"Even if I'm a good board member, that doesn't mean I'll be a good chair."

"Your colleagues thought so. The vote was unanimous."

"Nobody else wanted the job. Everyone knew that Ben was pulling for me from his nursing home. You know Ben: a master of telephone persuasion."

"Why do you think he chose you?"

"He and my dad were friends. I'm almost like a foster daughter."

"It's deeper than that. We both criticized Ben for his fence-sitting, but he was the glue that held the board together for twenty years. Everyone liked him. Respected him. Saw him as a friend."

"You knew you could rely on him. He kept you informed, asked your views, avoided surprises. He did a lot of backroom deals. But he always made sure he kept the board in the loop."

"He understood the essence of chairing a board."

"So, oh exalted mentor, what is the essence?" Sheila's tone was playful, but her intent was very serious.

"Your job as chair is *not* to run the board."

"So what *am* I supposed to do?"

"Help it be the best board it can be. Help it do what it needs to do for the Rosehill schools."

"That is very good advice."

"You knew it anyway. How's Ted feeling about your new role?"

"Mostly positive. Not crazy about my being away even more nights for one meeting or another. It's been good for his relation-

ship with Chris and Amy, though. He says he's proud of me. I think he really means it."

"That helps a lot. You'll be a great chair."

"You've been right before. Can I count on one thing?"

"What's that?"

"You have to sign on for another term as my chief counselor."

"A pleasure and an honor. Besides, you're not going to need that much counsel. And," said Fran, gesturing to her capuccino, "the fringe benefits are pretty good, too."

Three months later. Friday morning at Sheila's home.

"You haven't been wrong about too much, Fran," said Sheila as she poured coffee, "but I may need more help than you thought."

"Problems with the board?"

"Actually, the board is terrific. The only new member is Rebecca Mendonca."

"She's a good lawyer. A real child advocate."

"Right. She's great. Gene and Shirley still have their agendas, but they're team players on most things. You like Beverly and Clyde as much as I do. Mary and I have been friends since the night we were elected. I feel pretty lucky."

"So what's troubling you?"

"I'm beginning to entertain a very uncomfortable thought. We may need a new superintendent."

"Mildred's planning to leave?"

"Not to my knowledge. But maybe she should."

"Why?"

"I'd hoped that she and I would really work closely together. We've both tried. But it's not working."

"What's wrong?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. She and Ben got on just fine. Maybe it's just me?"

"You're different from Ben. You don't work downtown and eat lunch at Berta's every day. You haven't spent a quarter century oiling the wheels of influence in Rosehill," Fran pointed out.

"Should I?"

"No. That'd be a scenario right out of *Little House on the Prairie.* Ben was right for his time. But Rosehill has changed a lot. The schools need to change as well."

"That's where Mildred and I aren't seeing eye to eye," said Sheila, frustrated. "For instance, we really need to move ahead on site-based management. We've been sending all kinds of mixed signals. Principals, teachers, parents—everybody's frustrated."

"Mildred doesn't see it that way?"

"Every time I raise the issue, she gets defensive—like I'm criticizing her leadership."

"Maybe she's right?"

"I've tried to be very gentle. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells, but Mildred seems to think I'm an impatient hothead."

"Remember when Mildred started as superintendent? She knew what she wanted to do, and she was pretty aggressive. Raising academic standards. Strengthening the process for selecting principals."

"I have to give her credit for that. We have good administrators."

"Have you talked to other members of the board?"

Sheila nodded. "Most."

"How do they feel?"

"That Mildred's been superintendent a long time. The veterans feel that she and Ben got along fine because neither wanted to rock the boat. Privately, most feel we need a new superintendent. But everyone likes Mildred. No one really wants to take this one on."

"Including you?"

"*Especially* me! I've never fired anyone. It feels so destructive."

"It can be destructive. Sometimes boards make bad decisions. Even if it's a good decision, it's easy to screw up the process. But it's also destructive if a board doesn't act when it should."

"So the question is whether that's really what we need to do. I know that boards are sometimes too impatient. Expecting miracles: Transform the schools in a couple of years or we'll find someone who can. But Mildred's been here nine years now."

"What do you want that Mildred isn't doing?"

"More initiative. More sense of direction. She's reactive a lot of the time. Waiting for the board to bring things up. She should be bringing new ideas to us. She's not even moving on some of the

things we've been trying to do for years, like moving more decision-making out to the schools."

"Have you told her all that?"

"I've tried. I don't know if I'm getting through."

"Have you talked to Mildred about the possibility of her leaving?"

"Not yet. I'm afraid to, I suppose. But I have to do it. The superintendent's performance assessment is coming up soon. After that, we have to decide whether to renew her contract. If we don't face it now, we'll be digging ourselves into a hole."

"It sounds as if you pretty much know what you need to do."

"Maybe, but it's scary. We have to do the performance assessment as well as possible. Whatever we do, the board needs to stay together. I've heard horror stories about boards that fell apart over hiring or firing a superintendent."

"That makes good sense," said Fran.

"Meanwhile, I need to talk to Mildred."

"What are you going to say to her?"

"Remind her about the evaluation process and her role in it. Tell her straight out that the board will be asking pretty seriously if it's time for a new superintendent."

"That'll be hard."

"I know. But it has to be done. Not just for our sake, for but her sake, too. Mildred needs to think about what she wants to do next. Does it still make sense for her to continue as superintendent in Rosehill? Is she really on board for the board's objectives? Or is this a good time for her to make a change?"

"Those are the questions you'll ask her?"

"I'll try."

"It's just like I said a while ago," said Fran confidently.

"What?"

"You're going to be a great board chair!"

Another long meeting. Heated input from citizens with different ideas about redrawing elementary districts when the Akanda School opened. Another of Gene's periodic lectures on serving special needs students. A controversy over a new middle school history

course. Sheila was tired and eager to get home. She almost made it to the door when she heard Rebecca Mendonca calling her name.

"Rebecca," Sheila said, trying to sound more cheerful than she felt. "How are you?"

"OK, I guess. I admired the way you handled the meeting tonight. You do a great job!"

"Thanks, Rebecca," Sheila said with quiet satisfaction. "That's good to hear."

"Could I ask you a favor?"

"Sure."

"I've been on the board a couple of months now. I'm still pretty confused. Could we meet sometime, for breakfast or lunch? I have a lot of questions. You might be able to help."

Sheila paused. "Do you expect to run again at the next board election?"

Rebecca looked puzzled. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it. Maybe not."

"Would you be willing to bet on it? How about dinner at La Trattoria?"

"I guess so. Why?"

"That's the going rate in Rosehill for consultations with new board members." Sheila sensed that Rebecca was growing even more mystified. "Seriously, Rebecca, I'd love to meet. How about lunch on Wednesday?"

By the time Sheila reached her car, her fatigue had given way to exhilaration and satisfaction. Somewhere she'd read that the essence of leadership is giving—gifts from the heart. That's what made school board membership so satisfying for her. She could make her own gifts to her children, her friends, and her community.

As she pulled into the driveway, she hoped Ted would be waiting.

Conclusion: The Cycle Continues[1]

The novice has become a veteran. The learner is now a teacher. With the help of a wise mentor, Sheila has learned to understand and use four different frames. Each has its own image of what schools are. Each also has a distinctive ethical message about what values are most important. The structural frame assigns high priority to excellence. Schools should devote themselves to maximizing student achievement. The political frame emphasizes justice. Fairness in allocating resources among different students is a central issue. From a human resource perspective, schools are like families. Love, compassion, and serving the full range of of human needs are at the core of the human resource ideal. Symbolically, the most important value is faith, a deep spiritual commitment to learning and the value of every individual.

Excellence

School board members often bring knowledge and expertise that the school district needs. As a technical expert, a board member's

1. Material in this section is adapted from an earlier article: Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (1992). "Images of Leadership," *The American School Board Journal, 179*(4), 36-39.

ethical imperative is excellence: ensuring that whatever is worth doing is done as well as possible. As potential catalysts for excellence, boards make two common mistakes.

The first mistake is failing to set a model of excellence in the board's own operations. Trustees are amateurs, but board meetings need not be amateur hours. The school board in one northeastern city is a dismaying case in point. After firing one superintendent, they spent many months looking for a replacement. The process crashed after the names of the "leading candidates" were leaked. Every candidate withdrew, some commenting that no job was worth the pain of working for a board like this one. The board members blamed each other and had to start the search all over.

Second, as catalysts, boards often fail to set and maintain a consistent standard of excellence for the district. Amidst a heavy agenda, a shortage of time, and a multitude of people and issues competing for attention, boards can get lost in the trees and lose sight of the forest. The proper role for the board is to continually remind the administrators and the professional staff of their responsibility for setting a standard of excellence for themselves and for their students.

Caring

Robert Greenleaf (1973) argued that the essential leadership task is service. If the board members are servant leaders, their ethical responsibility is caring: concern, respect, and love for each individual. With caring, as with excellence, boards can be both model and catalyst. A board is a model of caring when its members behave in ways that suggest respect and caring for one another, the staff, parents, and students. Many boards fail this test. A friend who is now in his second superintendency explained why he had left his previous job. "I liked the students, the faculty, and the administrators," he said. "I liked the community. But I was tired of the abuse from the school board. It was not just me. They did it to the staff, and often to one another." When board members abuse one another or school professionals, they model exactly the wrong values for their district.

Justice

When interests are diverse and resources scarce, conflict is inevitable. Under those circumstances, leaders must be advocates. The effective advocate has a clear direction and agenda, a network of allies and supporters, and skills in negotiating. Individually and collectively, school board members can play a critical role as advocates for education. In a world of competing interests and scarce resources, school boards often have to make trade-offs. They cannot give everyone everything that they might want, and they must decide who gets what. What they must do is honor a value of fairness in making such decisions.

Trustees can provide a model of justice in at least two ways. One is by developing a shared commitment to just and fair decision-making. In school districts, this implies the duty of education for all children. A shared commitment to fairness does not change the fact that board members are different from one another: They bring different backgrounds, perspectives, and commitments. This is exactly how it should be in a democratic society. Dialogue and debate are essential and healthy, if they are conducted within a framework of a larger, shared commitment to justice and fairness. As local politics have become increasingly contentious and fractionated, boards have sometimes split into unruly collections of individuals who define their goals and values solely in terms of the particular subgroup they represent. When boards are torn apart, they lose their ability to serve as an effective collective advocate for education and the interests of children.

Promoting Faith

Schools, like temples, can be seen as sacred places—expressions of human aspirations and monuments to faith in human possibility. In this view, the responsibility of a school board is spiritual leadership. By spiritual, we do not mean religion or a particular theology; rather, we mean a concern with the human spirit. Dictionary definitions of *spirit* include: "the intelligent or immaterial part of man," "the animating or vital principal in living things," and "the moral

nature of humanity." Spiritual leaders help people find meaning and faith, and they help them answer the fundamental questions that have confronted humans in every time and place: Who am I as an individual? Who are we as a people? What is the purpose in my life? In our collective life? What ethical principles should we follow?

As spiritual leaders, board members have a responsibility to model faith in the capacity of every child to learn and grow, faith in the schools, and faith in the community. As a catalyst, the role of the board is to help the staff, students, and community to sustain their faith. Teaching and learning can be exhilarating and joyful, but they can also be arduous, frustrating, and exhausting. Students often enter school with an enthusiasm for learning that they lose long before they graduate. Teachers often enter the profession with enthusiasm, confidence, and a desire to help children. Some teachers never lose that spark, but many do. They become frustrated with their working conditions and discouraged by how hard it is to make a difference or even know if they have made a difference. Many burn out and retire on the job. As spiritual leaders, board members are responsible for sustaining and encouraging faith in themselves and recalling others to the faith when they have lost it.

Conclusion

Each of the four major ways of understanding schools implies a leadership role and an ethical responsibility for school boards. (The argument is summarized in Table 7.1.) Most readers are likely to prefer some ways to others, and to feel that some of these images make sense, whereas others are incorrect or even corrupt. Such preferences are a regular source of misunderstanding and nonproductive conflict. If you believe board members must be advocates, you might see servant leaders as too soft, whereas they may see you as too cynical. If you are an advocate for excellence, you might view those who champion faith as airheads or zealots, whereas they may see you as coldly elitist. All of these perspectives are important, and all can contribute to a board's functioning. Board members need to learn to recognize their own orientations while understanding and appreciating those whose orientations are different.

TABLE 7.1 Four Major Ways of Understanding Schools

If Your School Is	*Your Leadership Role Is*	*Your Ethical Responsibility Is*
Factory	Technical expert	Excellence
Extended family	Servant	Caring
Jungle	Advocate	Justice
Temple	Spiritual leader	Promoting faith

The leadership roles and ethical responsibilities also focus clearly on a perennial question in boards: How do members balance their individual concerns against those of the institution as a whole? How can board members advocate effectively for themselves and their constituents while contributing to the overall well-being of the institution? Boards with shared values will find that balance much easier to manage. Such values can provide both a context for a continuing conversation and ground rules that set standards of effective behavior for individuals and for the board as a whole.

Different values will not always point in the same direction, and many board members will cherish some of them more than others. But boards that strive to honor all of them can serve a powerful function as both model and catalyst. The most important responsibility of a board is not to answer every question, nor make the right decision on every issue that comes before it. No doubt boards are accountable for budgets and buses, and they must respond to legal requirements and political pressures. But school boards serve a deeper, more powerful, and more durable function when they serve as both model and catalyst for values like excellence, caring, justice, and faith.

Annotated Bibliography and Reference

Annotated Bibliography

A. General

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (1990). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice and leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book presents a systematic overview of the authors' ideas about leadership and organizations, with many illustrations and examples from schools, colleges, government, and the private sector.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (1993). *The path to school leadership: A portable mentor.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

This book tells the story of Pico School and its new principal, Jaime Rodriguez, as he searches for effective solutions to the many surprising problems and puzzles that he encounters in his early months. Like Sheila Daly, he is fortunate enough to find a wise and caring mentor—in his case, a veteran principal named Brenda Connors.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (1994). *Becoming a teacher leader: From isolation to collaboration.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

The second book in the "Rosehill Trilogy" looks at school leadership through the eyes of classroom teachers. It tells the story of a new teacher in her first year at Pico School as she tries to cope with her classroom, her colleagues, and the difficulties of balancing work and personal life.

Gardner, J. W. (1989). *On leadership.* New York: Free Press.

If you could read only one book on leadership, this is a good choice. Gardner packs a lot of wisdom and experience into a highly readable and valuable book.

B. Power and politics

Kotter, J. P. (1985). *Power and influence: Beyond formal authority.* New York: Free Press.

This book is written for corporate managers, but school board members will find it very useful. It provides a clear and comprehensive discussion of power and politics in organizations.

C. Responding to Human Needs

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This book offers a clear and compelling vision of how principals, teachers, parents, and children can work together to build learning communities.

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D. Understanding Structure in Schools

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This article uses a famous case of an unusually effective design team to illustrate the symbolic and cultural elements that are critical to peak performance in teams.

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Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. (1990). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

A down-to-earth, practical guide to analyzing and changing school culture.

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Greenleaf, R. K. (1973). *The servant as leader*. Newton Center, MA: Robert K. Greenleaf Center.

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